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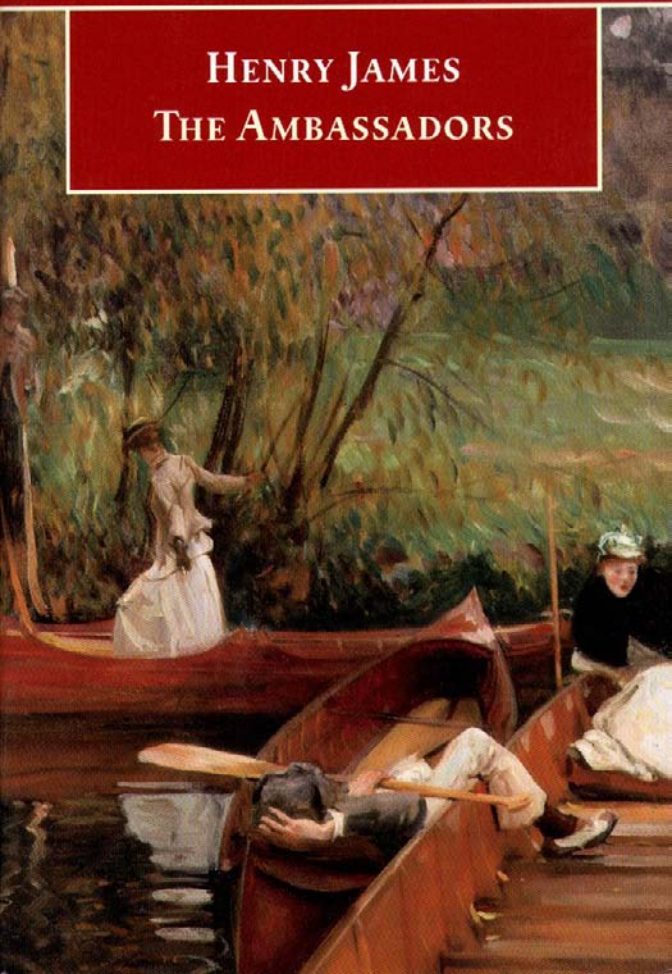
HENRY JAMES
THE AMBASSADORS



OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

THE AMBASSADORS

HENRY JAMES was born in New York in 1843 of ancestry both Irish and Scottish. He received a remarkably cosmopolitan education in New York, London, Paris, and Geneva, and entered law school at Harvard in 1862. After 1866, he lived mostly in Europe, at first writing critical articles, reviews, and short stories for American periodicals. He lived in London for more than twenty years, and in 1898 moved to Rye, where his later novels were written. Under the influence of an ardent sympathy for the British cause in the First World War, Henry James was in 1915 naturalized a British subject. He died in 1916.

In his early novels, which include *Roderick Hudson* (1875) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), he was chiefly concerned with the impact of the older civilization of Europe upon American life. He analysed English character with extreme subtlety in such novels as *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Awkward Age* (1899). In his last three great novels, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), he returned to the 'international' theme of the contrast of American and European character.

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HENRY JAMES

The Ambassadors

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by
CHRISTOPHER BUTLER

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INTRODUCTION

The Ambassadors is very largely a series of conversations. James's elderly hero Lambert Strether makes a stately progress to and fro amongst the members of the closed society he encounters in Paris, making the most discreet and indirect inquiries concerning the matter he has been sent from America to investigate: that of the relationship between young Chad Newsome and an unknown woman. Since James's standards for verisimilitude will not, in theory, allow him to address the reader directly, he has 'to set up a confidante or two' to be, like Maria Gostrey, both Strether's and 'the reader's friend' (Preface). Indeed, after the almost final revelation of the book, 'Strether filled up the time, as he had so often filled it before, by going to see Miss Gostrey.' Such interviews usually involve the mulling over of immediately preceding events. For it is interpretation, in all its senses, with which Strether and the reader are primarily concerned, even though it leads often enough to his and our bewilderment at the sheer complexity of it all. But then not all of his interlocutors prove to be strictly speaking truthful. James gloats in his Preface over the way in which he 'was to find the way open here to any amount of delightful dissimulation'.

Nevertheless, the true state of affairs as it affects Chad will probably become clear to the reader long before it does to 'poor Strether'. He seems at the start to have accepted a straightforward 'mission' of separating Chad from a 'wicked woman' and of bringing him home to an appreciation of his business opportunities and to a respectable marriage: indeed, 'in triumph as a kind of wedding present to mother'. Here begin mixed motives, for Mrs Newsome has indicated that she will express her gratitude by marrying her ambassador. There will be financial stability for all involved. However, although

Strether can perceive, in a 'flash', that Chad is a 'young man marked out by women' he doesn't for some time know which one. Nor does he or the reader yet appreciate what being 'marked out' might amount to. It is Strether's growing realisation that such a state may be no bad thing that is central to his quest for the truth.

For the structure of the novel, and our intellectual appreciation of its 'game of difficulty breathlessly played' as the Preface puts it, depends on our seeing it as a series, in each of its 'medallion'-like parts, of carefully graded and artfully deferred answers within a narrative which restricts itself to a single point of view and begins with a question. The very syntax of the novel, as Ian Watt has argued, reflects its overall plan as 'one of progressive yet artfully delayed clarification' within which an 'abundance of negatives' enacts Strether's tendency to habitual qualification, and so 'puts the reader in the right judicial frame of mind' (see note to 1.1., p. 439 below). We are thus drawn into the very process of composition by which James refines his story: for his hero's speculations make the text, as he wonders how the story of others might turn out. These depend less on detective story-like deduction than upon refined impressionistic perception, as in one of James's teasing prolepses at the beginning, when he tells us (interfering in his text far more than his theory would seem to allow) that Strether's 'first walks in Europe were a kind of finely lurid intimation of what one might find at the end of that process'. However Zolaesque the promise of the 'lurid' may seem to be, it is to be subdued by the fine tenuousness of Strether's 'intimations'. We cannot hope for the crude scandal that Chad's family seem to expect, for all too soon we suspect that James's hero has a mind too fine to allow himself immediately to perceive it. This is partly because he evaluates his experience not so much in terms of the knowledge he is supposed to acquire, as in rather Paterian aesthetic terms. When he meets Chad 'his perception of the young man's identity . . . had been quite one of the sensations that most count in life', even if his

actual conversation with him leaves him with little more than 'clues' and 'clues to clues' which make him feel his 'ignorance' and what he 'didn't know'. (This is a phrase which James repeats here four times in three consecutive sentences.) He goes to bed that night 'rather bewildered'. He is in fact in that state which James thinks highly conducive to his own art: 'It seems probable that if we were never bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us' (*The Art of the Novel*, p. 63).

Strether's confusion is largely due to the peculiar indirection and hair-splitting of the things that his newly acquired Parisian friends (who are nevertheless nearly all American) tell him. The reader's pleasure thus lies very much in his or her apprehension of the inexplicit implications of what people say – subtle shifts in register, overtones, and 'subtext'. They use a code, very easily confused with James's own, in which even the commonplace or slangy phrase, such as 'a good woman' or 'all right' has to be set in a context of reticence, of polite and mannered manœuvring into false positions. Hidden motives dictate these shifts. As Bersani remarks, James is willing to 'desublimate social life' and to 'indicate the individual needs which the code's rhetoric obscures'; but he also enjoys 'the play of those needs along the surface of talk'.[1]

Before writing *The Ambassadors*, James composed a 20,000-word 'Project of a Novel by Henry James' for submission to magazine editors; in this he says that Strether 'finds himself sinking, as I say, up to his middle in Difference – difference from what he expected, difference in Chad, difference in everything; and Difference, as I again say, is what I give' (*Notebooks*, p. 300). The word can indeed be given some of the implications that it has in deconstructive criticism. For one can say that Strether is told to approach his problem in the light of the simple moral

[1] Critical quotations are taken from the works cited in 'Further reading'.

oppositions (the innocent Chad in the hands of a 'wicked woman', the notions of being 'virtuous', 'saved', or 'lost') favoured by those who sent him. But he finds that in a world where moral distinctions or differences are multiplied, these oppositions won't work, and need to be mediated by any number of distinctions that lie between them. He comes to Paris to 'save' Chad and finds that he has already been 'saved' – in another sense. In the light of Paris, a 'Babylonic' culture vastly different from that of Woollett, Massachusetts, good and evil moral qualities cannot be so simply opposed as they are in New England. Indeed, for the observer of 'differences' they may even collapse into one another. Strether and the reader are, hardly surprisingly, being moved into a 'liberal' position in between. In arriving there Strether has to break with the puritanical and utilitarian morality of a woman who is virtually his employer rather than his fiancée (another 'difference' he has to come to appreciate). He has to move from a Victorian world of moral absolutes to a more 'modern' relativistic and pragmatic one.

In doing so he takes a distinctively Arnoldian attitude. He enjoys a 'free play of the mind on all subjects', as recommended in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1865) and elsewhere; and he attempts disinterestedness. He indeed echoes Arnold in reminding himself that he 'mustn't dispossess himself of the faculty of seeing things as they are'. But he finally arrives at a position close to that of his brother William. Henry, having read *Pragmatism: a New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking* in 1907 was 'lost in the wonder of the extent to which all my life I have (like M. Jourdain) unconsciously pragmatised' (letter of 17 October 1907).

Such a position only emerges very slowly in the novel. Some very evasive language has to be decoded, much of it lent to Strether by James, for it is not always possible to know whether the awareness we are dealing with is that of the narrator or his character. Strether opines on meeting Chad that he has been 'made over'; but what this comes to

the reader can only guess. It is yet another idiosyncratic colloquial phrase to which no clear meaning can be attached. Even as he moves to the heart of his quest, being told by Little Bilham (a young bohemian painter) that Chad's is a 'virtuous attachment', or by Madame de Vionnet to tell Mrs Newsome that she has 'been good for' Chad, he is still surrounded by ambiguities. James develops these with such virtuosity in the novel that the reader is forced with Strether to accept 'a sense of names in the air, of ghosts at the windows, of signs and tokens, a whole range of expression all about him, too thick for prompt discrimination'. Even when we think we have penetrated the secret of the plot, we are as tormented as Strether is by the finer distinctions, which are so inexplicitly articulated that the not said is as good a clue as the said. Everyone, except Strether, can rely on silence to the bitter end, so that, as far as he and Madame de Vionnet are concerned, 'It ended in fact by being quite beautiful between them, the number of things they had a manifest consciousness of not saying.'

This is not simply a matter for private self-congratulation. It is a pointer to the novel's aesthetic aims and to its intended effect on the reader. The elaborate manœuvring of the characters into unspoken positions, so typical of James's late work, nevertheless risks reaching a pitch of obfuscation at which the reader loses patience. Indeed H. M. Alden, in composing a memorandum on James's 'Project' for the novel as submitted to Harper's, was led to say that 'The tissues of it are too subtly fine for general appreciation. It is subjective, fold within fold of a complex mental web, in which the reader is lost if his much-wearied attention falters' (*Notebooks*, p. 372). The triumph of Modernist formalism and the growth of academic study based upon it have probably increased the stamina or tolerance of readers since; and in any case most of them will I think agree that *The Ambassadors*, with its thread of a plot 'stretched quite scientifically tight' (letter of 23 December 1903) entangles the reader far less in this way than does *The Golden Bowl*.

Reticence and indirection in *The Ambassadors* may also be symptomatic on James's part of a refusal to allow 'immoral' matters to emerge from a late Victorian self-protecting euphemism. Some critics, notably Geismar, see him as subject to the 'superstition that sexual love . . . was not a source of life, but was a ludicrous, devouring and destructive process'. Although this, like Geismar's discernment of a 'sublimated homosexual situation' in the book, is maybe going too far, we might still be tempted to feel a small shock of recognition when E. M. Forster says of these characters that 'They are incapable of fun, of rapid motion, of carnality, and of nine-tenths of heroism' and that 'their clothes will not take off', were it not for the fact that James has made his plot ultimately turn (though a little obscurely) on this very fact. The obscurity is no doubt due to James's self-proclaimed 'infinite tact and delicacy of presentation' ('Project') which, echoed in his characters, prevents Strether, obsessed though he may be by Parisian life, from grasping a commonplace of French sexual culture – that of the 'éducation sentimentale'. James was aware of Flaubert's novel, and indeed critical of it, as he was also of the French novelists' concern for the 'jeune homme sensible et distingué qui débute dans l'adultère' (letter of 23 February 1888). He found this sort of concern morally distasteful, and Strether isn't really allowed to know much about it. He may of course, like Maggie Verver, be protected by that peculiar form of 'American innocence' that can co-exist with intellectual subtlety (on the assumption that only by being innocent can you fail to see something without being accused of stupidity). The question is whether James really suffers from a form of the same inhibition. But such judgments depend upon very complicated and also, very likely, prejudiced and stereotypical cultural preconceptions. They are best left once more for the reader to decide. Certainly strong sexual attraction is implicit here, and a desire for greater explicitness in a novel of 1900 may simply reflect a voyeurism greater than James could provide for, even through the consciousness of a man who is stirred by

'the sense that he may have a little super-sensual hour in the vicarious freedom of another' (*Notebooks*, p. 228).

This unwillingness to define the events of plot, while characteristic of James's method, is somewhat paradoxically and incongruously combined with another characteristic: that of self-sufficiency. For *The Ambassadors*, as the reader may by now have perceived, requires very little critical interpretation of an explanatory kind. Indeed a quite sufficient commentary on its intrigue can be found within it by the attentive reader. There is hardly any subtle exposé of character that one can propose against James's own. (Crude Freudian allegorisation is of course another matter.) What may more plausibly concern the reader is the point of it all, and the values involved in our concern for the nuances of expression amongst a number of relatively rich, idle people, doing very little of any consequence in the world, whose purposes seem to be almost entirely controlled by their personal relationships and their aesthetic sense. (They thus truly reflect those conclusions of Moore's contemporaneous *Principia Ethica* which were supposed to have been passed on to Forster and the Bloomsbury group.) Much here depends on Strether. He may indeed be revaluing all his values, but he is hardly doing so in any very heroic or Nietzschean sense. The book is thus better appreciated on a more modest and aesthetic scale, as an ironic comedy, clearly distinguished in this respect from its two late companions.

For Strether is a rather Prufrockian figure (if a little more flexible than his companion, described as someone 'established in a railway carriage with a forward inclination. It represented the angle at which poor Waymarsh was to sit through the ordeal of Europe'). It is often difficult to take Strether any more seriously in his countervailing enthusiasm, as a man who 'went to Rouen with a little handbag and inordinately spent the night', and in Notre Dame 'played his eternal nippers over Gothic glooms'. James is perhaps ambivalent here. He says of Strether, 'I want him fine, clever, literary almost: it deepens the irony, the

tragedy' (*Notebooks*, p. 226). But he also describes him in the Preface as a Quixotic 'rueful worthy, from the very heart of New England', a 'belated man of the world'. Strether himself says that the green review he edits is his 'one presentable little scrap of an identity'. It is thus difficult to decide how inept some of his imaginings are meant to be, particularly when they focus upon women. He has the rather queenly habit of dressing them up as historical personages: he thinks that Mrs Newsome with her 'ruche' looks like Queen Elizabeth, and that Maria Gostrey is like Mary Stuart. He invests Madame de Vionnet with considerable 'Napoleonic glamour' and 'some dim lustre of the great legend'. In Notre Dame she seems 'some fine concentrated heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read' so that he has 'a kind of revelation of her heritage'. His indecision in these matters ultimately seems to be overcome by shifting her further back in history while making her more morally ambivalent. She is Cleopatra, and also Madame de Roland on her way to the scaffold. Passages like this surely have to be seen not simply as symptoms of an interaction with Europe in 'odd starts of the historic sense, suppositions and divinations with no warrant but their intensity', but also as fantasies. Strether comes close to Prufrock meditating on the mermaids in the chambers of the sea at one point: 'He could have compared her to a goddess still partly engaged in a morning cloud, or to a sea-nymph waist-high in the summer surge.' The combination of Woollett training and Parisian new experience does not immediately, or perhaps ever, lead to a Paterian balance. And so Strether can seem comic and mildly pathetic at the same time, bathed in the sympathetic irony provided by his narrator, as he confronts those problems which inevitably arise for him in the confrontation of youth with age, and moves toward that principled defeat and sexual withdrawal which James provides for him.

It is this confrontation indeed which James sees as the central subject and 'germ' of *The Ambassadors*, which is 'gathered up' in Strether's outburst to Little Bilham —

'Live all you can . . .'. Here he admits that he has missed the train waiting for him at the station: the young are clearly free in a way that he isn't, and his advice is that they should not 'at any rate miss things out of stupidity'. This brings the matter back not so much to a conflict of interests, as to that dangerous equation that James often seems to encourage between fine moral conduct and fine intelligence (thus Strether is ironically described as preparing to confront Sarah Pocock 'bristling with all the lucidity he had cultivated'). Or at least James brings us to a point in which moral and aesthetic discrimination interact. Indeed the growth of Strether's sympathy for Madame de Vionnet through his historical imaginings is an example. We are thus continually led back to that density of implication which I believe to be the substance of the novel . . . what it doesn't say. But these implications are not finally justified by any 'moral lesson' that the reader can draw from them.

For the moral positions in the novel, as the marvellously comic confrontation between Strether (now urging Chad to stay in Paris) and Sarah Pocock makes clear, are not unobvious. Sarah considers his conduct 'an outrage to women like us'; for her there can be no doubt of Chad's 'duty'. Her brother's 'distinction' is not, for her, to the point, any more than is his 'fortunate development'. Here a Victorian notion of duty confronts romantic self-realisation in an absurd comedy of non-communication. The liberal tide of thought, the drift from 'Victorian' to 'Modern', let alone our own more indulgent sexual morality, will put us on Chad's side at least, and so there is in a sense no large moral problem in the novel for *us*. But at this point in history there is one for James's characters, and we are supposed to enjoy the way they work it out.

It is thus the context or aesthetic frame for moral judgment – the conflict of cultures, Strether seeing Madame de Vionnet as Cleopatra, the Victorian attitude to lying, to which we must be sensitive. We need to exercise a certain historical sense, and to appreciate the way in which James has refined the 'vulgarity' of the 'dreadful little old

tradition, one of the platitudes of the human comedy, that people's moral scheme *does* break down in Paris' (Preface). We know that national cultures are relative to one another. What puts tension into the relationship for James is the fact that the New Englander's moral conscience made judgments which, because they were moral, might be thought to transcend such differences. Indeed, Sarah Pocock and the reader can both very well quit *The Ambassadors* convinced that its hero condones adultery. Thus when 'Sally Pocock' says 'I *know* Paris', she 'breathed a certain chill on Strether's ear', and ours. For through him we are supposed to know it better, as a 'vast bright Babylon, like some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked'.

All Strether ultimately has to oppose to Woollett judgments and values is a pragmatist's blurring of sharp edges. His state of mind and his perception of the city, cited above, hardly differ, hence his self-defence: 'I don't think there's anything I've done in any such calculated way as you describe. Everything has come as a sort of indistinguishable part of everything else.' We know how Strether arrives at this judgment, and so we are expected to endorse James's view in the Preface that 'the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision'. Since she has not read *The Ambassadors*, Sarah Pocock can be implicitly reproached for not liking her brother 'as he is', and certainly gives herself away by saying that Chad's lover isn't 'even an apology for a decent woman'. She fails to see that intellectual and emotional relations 'stop nowhere' (*The Art of the Novel*, p. 5). We on the other hand are expected to see that this novel can give them a tentative aesthetic ordering, in a 'drama of discrimination' (Preface) which can only be vitiated or arrested by Sarah Pocock's certainties. If she had her way, she would bring the novel to an end; but she departs, and leaves them to it.

It is then, Strether's impressionistic and aesthetic

apprehension, from the first 'note of Europe' through the 'deep taste of change' in Paris, that removes such simple conflicts from the centre of the reader's attention. James's aim is not to cut the Gordian knot of moral conflict but to manœuvre his characters into a final pattern of relationships. The completion of the quest, in one of those tableaux which, typically for James, combines seeing (vision) and betrayal, is thus of lesser consequence than the position Strether will then find himself in in relation to the other characters, in the 'endgame' of the novel. These moves reflect most satisfyingly Strether's apprehension of an alien culture, which 'gratifies some more distinctively disinterested, aesthetic, intellectual, social, even, so to speak, historical sense in him' ('Project'), just before it crumbles beyond the confines of the book, as Chad acquires an interest in the 'art of advertisement', Madame de Vionnet faces middle age, and Maria Gostrey's hardly but subtly expressed love for Strether goes unrequited. Strether the ambassador is thus left to his final negotiations, having some while ago realised that he represents no one but himself, and that indeed his own behaviour was at issue all along. The plot turns against him, as he remarks to Chad: 'It wasn't for you they came out, but for me. It wasn't to see for themselves what you're doing, but what I'm doing.'

The point seems to be that Strether should get nothing for himself from his experience – indeed for him it is all loss, though we may feel he is well out of a marriage with an overpowering and puritanical widow, however financially rewarding that may have been. It is this renunciation that provides the problematic moral of the tale for those who like such things.

James makes the working-out of his pattern matter to us, because it comes as the coda or aftermath to a superb climax to the story, in which he manages, by a newly specific determination of scene, to make Strether's realisation of what we have suspected all along truly revelatory. As David Lodge remarks in his brilliant analysis of this passage,

'Having committed himself completely to the idea of social beauty, Strether faces the painful truth that it is sustained by people who are human beings, with all the vulgar weaknesses of human beings.' These chapters, describing Strether by the river (XI.ii–iii) are, without the obtrusive Modernist use of this technique, one of the most impressively realised examples of stream of consciousness, and of the significance of perception within a given setting, in all literature. The frame reconciles the moral and the aesthetic; every word counts for the reader's sympathetic and amused participation in events. But any reader coming to *The Ambassadors* for the first time should not have his or her sense of discovery spoiled by anticipatory analysis of this episode. For it is the pleasure to be derived from the act of reading which is, in all that James says of this novel, revealed as his primary concern.

CHRISTOPHER BUTLER

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The Ambassadors appeared as a serial in twelve instalments in the periodical the *North American Review*, from January to December 1903 (P). The first American edition (A) was published in November 1903; it revises and supplements the P version, and restores three chapters and a few pages originally omitted. (These are four pages from: chapter v, i.e. Book II.ii; chapter xix, i.e. Book VIII.i; chapter xxviii, i.e. Book X.i; and chapter xxxv, i.e. Book XII.iv.) The P text was also independently revised and supplemented for the English edition (E) published in September 1903. When James came to make a final revision of the novel, he used the A edition as his text. It is this final text of the New York Edition (NYE), volumes XXI–XXII, published in New York and London in 1909, which is reprinted here.

The NYE perpetrated an error which James failed to notice in A: the original chapters xxviii and xxix (Book XI.i–ii) were in reverse order. This confusion was pointed out by Robert E. Young, an undergraduate at Stanford, in 1950 (see note to 353.1 below), and subsequent reprints of NYE have restored the intended chronology and interrelation of events, as does this one.

James thought that *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl* needed little revision for NYE as the possessors of 'altogether better literary manners' than their predecessors (*The Art of the Novel*, p. 344). He nevertheless found a certain amount to do. He omitted many relative pronouns and commas, with a smoothing-out effect which still looks a little eccentric when three or four adjectives succeed one another.

He also renumbered the chapters; instead of running through the novel in single sequence, they are grouped within twelve Books. This has the advantage of allowing us to see the book as firmly structured. The action extends into a new phase at the end of the sixth Book, as Strether urges Chad to stay, and new ambassadors are sent out; and climaxes of the action come in the penultimate Books V and XI.

As one might expect, some of James's stylistic changes are the result of a sharper perception of his characters: a 'not very tall' ambassador becomes 'importantly short' (151.12). Some revisions

show James searching for the *mot juste* with rather less success, for example when Maria commiserates with Strether on the nature of her compatriots, particularly as evidenced by the Pococks. She finally says of 'Woollett, Milrose and their products' – 'We're abysmal – but may we never be less so!' (300.16). In P she said 'but long may we wave!', in A 'but may we never fill up!' The first seems eccentric and the second comically obscure. In E she says, more flatly, 'but long may we play our parts!' It is odd that James takes such trouble with his vaguer phrases, as when Strether finds himself 'supposing everything' in A, and 'supposing innumerable wonderful things' in NYE (396.30).

Words changed to give different emphasis include 'the latter's inquiry' (P,A,E) becoming a more metaphorical 'plummet' (139.20), the sequence 'funny . . . funny . . . funnier' (P,E) becoming 'queer . . . queer . . . queerer' (348.29–32, and see note to 348.29 below) and 'romance' (P,A,E) as a quality of Chad's attachment becoming 'interest' (188.33). In general, the revisions from A to NYE are slight; and the most interesting differences are between E and NYE, of which some are discussed below, and others recorded in the variant readings given below, pp. 449–50.

The NYE is to be preferred because it embodies James's final revisions, particularly as they are not so radical as they were for earlier novels like *Roderick Hudson* or *The American*, where one may speak of two 'versions' of the novel. It may also be worth respecting James's feeling (cf. *The Art of the Novel* pp. 347–87) that his revisions sometimes recorded improved moral discriminations.

The English edition of the novel may have been based on the original typescript copy sent to Methuen, the periodical instalments so far available, and conceivably proof sheets from the Harper (A) edition. These were once more revised by James. Chapters xxviii and xxix are in the right order in E, and this edition contains passages that did not come to James's attention for revision for the NYE, since they were not in A. Two of these are significant for his conception of Chad's character. They are part of the Chapter V omitted from the periodical version. James possibly dropped them for reasons of propriety, since they specify more clearly and discursively Chad's sexual interests. The first, referring to his previous friends as

(NYE) Chad's number one, number two, number three (66.8)

continues in E

– through numbers indeed as to which it might be a question whether those of more modest clock faces wouldn't be exceeded.

A little further on, Strether muses concerning the sort of woman Chad might be involved with, and fears

(NYE) the exchange again, as was fairly to be presumed, of the vaunted best French for some special variety of the worst. (66.14)

This is expanded in E to read

French for something that might in a manner be a part of that ambiguous ideal, but was certainly not the part permitting publicity, either of appreciation or discussion, in respect of varieties of quality. All Mrs Newsome had now for a long time known of her son was that he had renewed his career in the expensive district – it was so, she felt, that she sufficiently designated it – and that he had not so established himself without intimate countenance. He had travelled, in the dreadful direction, almost like a Pasha – save that his palanquins had been by no means curtained and their occupants far from veiled; he had, in short, had company – scandalous, notorious company – across the bridges, company making with him, in the cynical journey, from stage to stage and from period to period, bolder pushes and taking larger freedoms: traces, echoes, almost legends, all these things, left in the wake of the pair.

It is of course possible that these passages were added for the benefit of the English, rather than restoring deletions made in P. Without the original typescript one cannot be certain.

FURTHER READING

James's large output has attracted an extensive critical industry, as the entries in the Bibliographical section below will show. The following list includes works by and on James referred to in this edition, and others which will offer interesting alternative readings of *The Ambassadors* and help to place it within James's last phase. The list of novels which follows offers no more than a selection of these which have attracted the most attention, and give the shape of his career. I have not attempted to specify a relevant selection of Tales and Novellas. For the interested general reader, there are a number of good selections. Some of those concerned with Americans in Europe are 'Four Meetings' (1877), 'An International Episode' (1878) 'Daisy Miller' (1878) 'The Pension Beaurepas' (1879) 'A Bundle of Letters' (1879) and 'Miss Gunton of Poughkeepsie' (1900).

I. JAMES'S WRITINGS

For titles that were republished in the New York Edition (NYE), 1907–9, the relevant volume number is indicated.

Novels

The American (1877), NYE II
The Europeans (1878)
Washington Square (1880)
The Portrait of a Lady (1881), NYE III–IV
The Spoils of Poynton (1897), NYE X
What Maisie Knew (1897), NYE XI
The Awkward Age (1899), NYE IX
The Wings of the Dove (1902), NYE XIX–XX
The Golden Bowl (1904), NYE XXIII–XXIV

Other Writings

Autobiography, ed. F. W. Dupee (London, 1956): includes *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914) and *The Middle Years* (1917).
Letters, I–IV, ed. L. Edel (Cambridge, Mass., 1974–84).
Letters, ed. Percy Lubbock, 2 vols (London, 1920).

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The Art of Travel, ed. M. D. Zabel (Garden City, New York, 1958).
The Future of the Novel, ed. L. Edel (London, 1956).
The Notebooks of Henry James, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and K. B. Murdock (New York, 1947, rpt. Chicago and London, 1981)
The Painter's Eye, ed. J. L. Sweeney (London, 1956).
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CHRONOLOGY OF HENRY JAMES

COMPILED BY LEON EDEL

1843	Born 15 April at No. 21 Washington Place, New York City.
1843–4	Taken abroad by parents to Paris and London: period of residence at Windsor.
1845–55	Childhood in Albany and New York.
1855–8	Attends schools in Geneva, London, Paris and Boulogne-sur-mer and is privately tutored.
1858	James family settles in Newport, Rhode Island.
1859	At scientific school in Geneva. Studies German in Bonn.
1860	At school in Newport. Receives back injury on eve of Civil War while serving as volunteer fireman. Studies art briefly. Friendship with John La Farge.
1862–3	Spends term in Harvard Law School.
1864	Family settles in Boston and then in Cambridge. Early anonymous story and unsigned reviews published.
1865	First signed story published in *Atlantic Monthly*.
1869–70	Travels in England, France and Italy. Death of his beloved cousin Minny Temple.
1870	Back in Cambridge, publishes first novel in *Atlantic*, *Watch and Ward*.
1872–4	Travels with sister Alice and aunt in Europe; writes impressionistic travel sketches for the *Nation*. Spends autumn in Paris and goes to Italy to write first large novel.
1874–5	On completion of *Roderick Hudson* tests New York City as residence; writes much literary journalism for *Nation*. First three books published: *Transatlantic Sketches*, *A Passionate Pilgrim* (tales) and *Roderick Hudson*.
1875–6	Goes to live in Paris. Meets Ivan Turgenev and through him Flaubert, Zola, Daudet, Maupassant and Edmond de Goncourt. Writes *The American*.

1876–7 Moves to London and settles in 3 Bolton Street, Piccadilly. Revisits Paris, Florence, Rome.

1878 'Daisy Miller' published in London establishes fame on both sides of the Atlantic. Publishes first volume of essays (*French Poets and Novelists*) and *The Europeans*.

1879–82 *Washington Square*, *Confidence*, *The Portrait of a Lady*.

1882–3 Revisits Boston: first visit to Washington. Death of parents.

1884–6 Returns to London. Sister Alice comes to live near him. Fourteen-volume collection of novels and tales published. Writes *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima*, published in the following year.

1886 Moves to flat at 34 De Vere Gardens West.

1887 Sojourn in Italy, mainly Florence and Venice. 'The Aspern Papers', *The Reverberator*, 'A London Life'. Friendship with grand-niece of Fenimore Cooper—Constance Fenimore Woolson.

1888 *Partial Portraits* and several collections of tales.

1889–90 *The Tragic Muse*.

1890–1 Dramatises *The American*, which has a short run. Writes four comedies, rejected by producers.

1892 Alice James dies in London.

1894 Miss Woolson commits suicide in Venice. James journeys to Italy and visits her grave in Rome.

1895 He is booed at first night of his play *Guy Domville*. Deeply depressed, he abandons the theatre.

1896–7 *The Spoils of Poynton*, *What Maisie Knew*.

1898 Takes long lease of Lamb House, in Rye, Sussex. *The Turn of the Screw* published.

1899–1900 *The Awkward Age*, *The Sacred Fount*. Friendship with Conrad and Wells.

1902–4 *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*. Friendships with H. C. Andersen and Jocelyn Persse.

1905 Revisits USA after 20-year absence, lectures on Balzac and the speech of Americans.

1906–10 *The American Scene*. Edits selective and revised New York Edition of his works in 24 volumes. Friendship with Hugh Walpole.

1910	Death of brother, William James.
1913	Sargent paints his portrait as 70th birthday gift from some 300 friends and admirers. Writes autobiographies, *A Small Boy and Others*, and *Notes of a Son and Brother*.
1914	*Notes on Novelists*. Visits wounded in hospitals.
1915	Becomes a British subject.
1916	Given Order of Merit. Dies 28 February in Chelsea, aged 72. Funeral in Chelsea Old Church. Ashes buried in Cambridge, Mass., family plot.
1976	Commemorative tablet unveiled in Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey, 17 June.

PREFACE

NOTHING IS more easy than to state the subject of 'The Ambassadors', which first appeared in twelve numbers of 'The North American Review' (1903) and was published as a whole the same year. The situation involved is gathered up betimes, that is in the second chapter of Book Fifth, for the reader's benefit, into as few words as possible—planted or 'sunk', stiffly and saliently, in the centre of the current, almost perhaps to the obstruction of traffic. Never can a composition of this sort have sprung straighter from a dropped grain of suggestion, and never can that grain, developed, overgrown and smothered, have yet lurked more in the mass as an independent particle. The whole case, in fine, is in Lambert Strether's irrepressible outbreak to little Bilham on the Sunday afternoon in Gloriani's garden, the candour with which he yields, for his young friend's enlightenment, to the charming admonition of that crisis. The idea of the tale resides indeed in the very fact that an hour of such unprecedented ease should have been felt by him *as* a crisis, and he is at pains to express it for us as neatly as we could desire. The remarks to which he thus gives utterance contain the essence of 'The Ambassadors', his fingers close, before he has done, round the stem of the full-blown flower; which, after that fashion, he continues officiously to present to us. 'Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what *have* you had? I'm too old —too old at any rate for what I see. What one loses one loses; make no mistake about that. Still, we have the illusion of freedom; therefore don't, like me to-day, be without the memory of that illusion. I was either, at the right time, too stupid or too intelligent to have it, and now I'm a case of reaction against the mistake. Do what you like so long as you don't make it. For it *was* a mistake. Live, live!' Such is

the gist of Strether's appeal to the impressed youth, whom he likes and whom he desires to befriend; the word 'mistake' occurs several times, it will be seen, in the course of his remarks—which gives the measure of the signal warning he feels attached to his case. He has accordingly missed too much, though perhaps after all constitutionally qualified for a better part, and he wakes up to it in conditions that press the spring of a terrible question. *Would* there yet perhaps be time for reparation?—reparation, that is, for the injury done his character; for the affront, he is quite ready to say, so stupidly put upon it and in which he has even himself had so clumsy a hand? The answer to which is that he now at all events *sees*; so that the business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision.

Nothing can exceed the closeness with which the whole fits again into its germ. That had been given me bodily, as usual, by the spoken word, for I was to take the image over exactly as I happened to have met it. A friend had repeated to me, with great appreciation, a thing or two said to him by a man of distinction, much his senior, and to which a sense akin to that of Strether's melancholy eloquence might be imputed—said as chance would have, and so easily might, in Paris, and in a charming old garden attached to a house of art, and on a Sunday afternoon of summer, many persons of great interest being present. The observation there listened to and gathered up had contained part of the 'note' that I was to recognise on the spot as to my purpose—had contained in fact the greater part; the rest was in the place and the time and the scene they sketched: these constituents clustered and combined to give me further support, to give me what I may call the note absolute. There it stands, accordingly, full in the tideway; driven in, with hard taps, like some strong stake for the noose of a cable, the swirl of the current roundabout it. What amplified the hint to more than the bulk of hints in general was the gift with it of the old Paris garden, for in that token were sealed up values infinitely precious. There was of course the seal to break

and each item of the packet to count over and handle and estimate; but somehow, in the light of the hint, all the elements of a situation of the sort most to my taste were there. I could even remember no occasion on which, so confronted, I had found it of a livelier interest to take stock, in this fashion, of suggested wealth. For I think, verily, that there are degrees of merit in subjects—in spite of the fact that to treat even one of the most ambiguous with due decency we must for the time, for the feverish and prejudiced hour, at least figure its merit and its dignity as *possibly* absolute. What it comes to, doubtless, is that even among the supremely good—since with such alone is it one's theory of one's honour to be concerned—there is an ideal *beauty* of goodness the invoked action of which is to raise the artistic faith to its maximum. Then truly, I hold, one's theme may be said to shine, and that of 'The Ambassadors', I confess, wore this glow for me from the beginning to end. Fortunately thus I am able to estimate this as, frankly, quite the best, 'all round', of my productions; any failure of that justification would have made such an extreme of complacency publicly fatuous.

I recall then in this connexion no moment of subjective intermittence, never one of those alarms as for a suspected hollow beneath one's feet, a felt ingratitude in the scheme adopted, under which confidence fails and opportunity seems but to mock. If the motive of 'The Wings of the Dove', as I have noted, was to worry me at moments by a sealing-up of its face—though without prejudice to its again, of a sudden, fairly grimacing with expression—so in this other business I had absolute conviction and constant clearness to deal with; it had been frank proposition, the whole bunch of data, installed on my premises like a monotony of fine weather. (The order of composition in these things, I may mention, was reversed by the order of publication; the earlier written of the two books having appeared as the later.) Even under the weight of my hero's years I could feel my postulate firm; even under the strain of the difference between those of Madame de Vionnet and those

of Chad Newsome, a difference liable to be denounced as shocking, I could still feel it serene. Nothing resisted, nothing betrayed, I seem to make out, in this full and sound sense of the matter; it shed from any side I could turn it to the same golden glow. I rejoiced in the promise of a hero so mature, who would give me thereby the more to bite into —since it's only into thickened motive and accumulated character, I think, that the painter of life bites more than a little. My poor friend should have accumulated character, certainly; or rather would be quite naturally and handsomely possessed of it, in the sense that he would have, and would always have felt he had, imagination galore, and that this yet wouldn't have wrecked him. It was immeasurable, the opportunity to 'do' a man of imagination, for if *there* mightn't be a chance to 'bite', where in the world might it be? This personage of course, so enriched, wouldn't give me, for his type, imagination in *predominance* or as his prime faculty, nor should I, in view of other matters, have found that convenient. So particular a luxury—some occasion, that is, for study of the high gift in *supreme* command of a case or of a career—would still doubtless come on the day I should be ready to pay for it; and till then might, as from far back, remain hung up well in view and just out of reach. The comparative case meanwhile would serve—it was only on the minor scale that I had treated myself even to comparative cases.

I was to hasten to add however that, happy stopgaps as the minor scale had thus yielded, the instance in hand should enjoy the advantage of the full range of the major; since most immediately to the point was the question of that *supplement* of situation logically involved in our gentleman's impulse to deliver himself in the Paris garden on the Sunday afternoon—or if not involved by strict logic then all ideally and enchantingly implied in it. (I say 'ideally', because I need scarce mention that for development, for expression of its maximum, my glimmering story was, at the earliest stage, to have nipped the thread of connexion with the possibilities of the actual reported speaker. *He* remains

but the happiest of accidents; his actualities, all too definite, precluded any range of possibilities; it had only been his charming office to project upon that wide field of the artist's vision—which hangs there ever in place like the white sheet suspended for the figures of a child's magic-lantern—a more fantastic and more moveable shadow.) No privilege of the teller of tales and the handler of puppets is more delightful, or has more of the suspense and the thrill of a game of difficulty breathlessly played, than just this business of looking for the unseen and the occult, in a scheme half-grasped, by the light or, so to speak, by the clinging scent, of the gage already in hand. No dreadful old pursuit of the hidden slave with bloodhounds and the rag of association can ever, for 'excitement', I judge, have bettered it at its best. For the dramatist always, by the very law of his genius, believes not only in a possible right issue from the rightly-conceived tight place; he does much more than this—he believes, irresistibly, in the necessary, the precious 'tightness' of the place (whatever the issue) on the strength of any respectable hint. It being thus the respectable hint that I had with such avidity picked up, what would be the story to which it would most inevitably form the centre? It is part of the charm attendant on such questions that the 'story', with the omens true, as I say, puts on from this stage the authenticity of concrete existence. It then *is*, essentially—it begins to be, though it may more or less obscurely lurk; so that the point is not in the least what to make of it, but only, very delightfully and very damnably, where to put one's hand on it.

In which truth resides surely much of the interest of that admirable mixture for salutary application which we know as art. Art deals with what we see, it must first contribute full-handed that ingredient; it plucks its material, otherwise expressed, in the garden of life—which material elsewhere grown is stale and uneatable. But it has no sooner done this than it has to take account of a *process*—from which only when it's the basest of the servants of man, incurring ignominious dismissal with no 'character', does it, and

whether under some muddled pretext of morality or on any other, pusillanimously edge away. The process, that of the expression, the literal squeezing-out of value is another affair—with which the happy luck of mere finding has little to do. The joys of finding, at this stage, are pretty well over; that quest of a subject as a whole by 'matching', as the ladies say at the shops, the big piece with the snippet, having ended, we assume, with a capture. The subject is found, and if the problem is then transferred to the ground of what to do with it the field opens out for any amount of doing. This is precisely the infusion that, as I submit, completes the strong mixture. It is on the other hand the part of the business that can least be likened to the chase with horn and hound. It's all a sedentary part—involves as much ciphering, of sorts, as would merit the highest salary paid to a chief accountant. Not, however, that the chief accountant hasn't *his* gleam of bliss; for the felicity, or at least the equilibrium, of the artist's state dwells less, surely, in the further delightful complications he can smuggle in than in those he succeeds in keeping out. He sows his seed at the risk of too thick a crop; wherefore yet again, like the gentlemen who audit ledgers, he must keep his head at any price. In consequence of all which, for the interest of the matter, I might seem here to have my choice of narrating my 'hunt' for Lambert Strether, of describing the capture of the shadow projected by my friend's anecdote, or of reporting on the occurrences subsequent to that triumph. But I had probably best attempt a little to glance in each direction; since it comes to me again and again, over this licentious record, that one's bag of adventures, conceived or conceivable, has been only half-emptied by the mere telling of one's story. It depends so on what one means by that equivocal quantity. There is the story of one's hero, and then, thanks to the intimate connexion of things, the story of one's story itself. I blush to confess it, but if one's a dramatist one's a dramatist, and the latter imbroglio is liable on occasion to strike me as really the more objective of the two.

The philosophy imputed to him in that beautiful out-

break, the hour there, amid such happy provision, striking for him, would have been then, on behalf of my man of imagination, to be logically and, as the artless craft of comedy has it, 'led up' to; the probable course to such a goal, the goal of so conscious a predicament, would have in short to be finely calculated. Where has he come from and why has he come, what is he doing (as we Anglo-Saxons, and we only, say, in our foredoomed clutch of exotic aids to expression) in that *galère*? To answer these questions plausibly, to answer them as under cross-examination in the witness-box by counsel for the prosecution, in other words satisfactorily to account for Strether and for his 'peculiar tone', was to possess myself of the entire fabric. At the same time the clue to its whereabouts would lie in a certain *principle* of probability: he wouldn't have indulged in his peculiar tone without a reason; it would take a felt predicament or a false position to give him so ironic an accent. One hadn't been noting 'tones' all one's life without recognising when one heard it the voice of the false position. The dear man in the Paris garden was then admirably and unmistakably *in* one—which was no small point gained; what next accordingly concerned us was the determination of *this* identity. One could only go by probabilities, but there was the advantage that the most general of the probabilities were virtual certainties. Possessed of our friend's nationality, to start with, here was a general probability in his narrower localism; which, for that matter, one had really but to keep under the lens for an hour to see it give up its secrets. He would have issued, our rueful worthy, from the very heart of New England—at the heels of which matter of course a perfect train of secrets rumbled for me into the light. They had to be sifted and sorted, and I shall not reproduce the detail of that process; but unmistakably they were all there, and it was but a question, auspiciously, of picking among them. What the 'position' would infallibly be, and why, on his hands, it had turned 'false'—these inductive steps could only be as rapid as they were distinct. I accounted for everything—and 'everything' had by this time become the most

promising quantity—by the view that he had come to Paris in some state of mind which was literally undergoing, as a result of new and unexpected assaults and infusions, a change almost from hour to hour. He had come with a view that might have been figured by a clear green liquid, say, in a neat glass phial; and the liquid, once poured into the open cup of *application*, once exposed to the action of another air, had begun to turn from green to red, or whatever, and might, for all he knew, be on its way to purple, to black, to yellow. At the still wilder extremes represented perhaps, for all he could say to the contrary, by a variability so violent, he would at first, naturally, but have gazed in surprise and alarm; whereby the *situation* clearly would spring from the play of wilderness and the development of extremes. I saw in a moment that, should this development proceed both with force and logic, my 'story' would leave nothing to be desired. There is always, of course, for the story-teller, the irresistible determinant and the incalculable advantage of his interest in the story *as such*; it is ever, obviously, overwhelmingly, the prime and precious thing (as other than this I have never been able to see it); as to which what makes for it, with whatever headlong energy, may be said to pale before the energy with which it simply makes for itself. It rejoices, none the less, at its best, to seem to offer itself in a light, to seem to know, and with the very last knowledge, what it's about—liable as it yet is at moments to be caught by us with its tongue in its cheek and absolutely no warrant but its splendid impudence. Let us grant then that the impudence is always there—there, so to speak, for grace and effect and *allure*; there, above all, because the Story is just the spoiled child of art, and because, as we are always disappointed when the pampered don't 'play up', we like it, to that extent, to look all its character. It probably does so, in truth, even when we most flatter ourselves that we negotiate with it by treaty.

All of which, again, is but to say that the *steps*, for my fable, placed themselves with a prompt and, as it were, functional assurance—an air quite as of readiness to have dis-

pensed with logic had I been in fact too stupid for my clue. Never, positively, none the less, as the links multiplied, had I felt less stupid than for the determination of poor Strether's errand and for the apprehension of his issue. These things continued to fall together, as by the neat action of their own weight and form, even while their commentator scratched his head about them; he easily sees now that they were always well in advance of him. As the case completed itself he had in fact, from a good way behind, to catch up with them, breathless and a little flurried, as he best could. The false position, for our belated man of the world—belated because he had endeavoured so long to escape being one, and now at last had really to face his doom—the false position for him, I say, was obviously to have presented himself at the gate of that boundless menagerie primed with a moral scheme of the most approved pattern which was yet framed to break down on any approach to vivid facts; that is to any at all liberal appreciation of them. There would have been of course the case of the Strether prepared, whatever presenting himself, only to judge and to feel meanly; but *he* would have moved for me, I confess, enveloped in no legend whatever. The actual man's note, from the first of our seeing it struck, is the note of discrimination, just as his drama is to become, under stress, the drama of discrimination. It would have been his blest imagination, we have seen, that had already helped him to discriminate; the element that was for so much of the pleasure of my cutting thick, as I have intimated, into his intellectual, into his moral substance. Yet here it was, at the same time, just here, that a shade for a moment fell across the scene.

There was the dreadful little old tradition, one of the platitudes of the human comedy, that people's moral scheme *does* break down in Paris; that nothing is more frequently observed; that hundreds of thousands of more or less hypocritical or more or less cynical persons annually visit the place for the sake of the probable catastrophe, and that I came late in the day to work myself up about it. There was in fine the *trivial* association, one of the vulgarest in the

world; but which gave me pause no longer, I think, simply because its vulgarity is so advertised. The revolution performed by Strether under the influence of the most interesting of great cities was to have nothing to do with any *bêtise* of the imputably 'tempted' state; he was to be thrown forward, rather, thrown quite with violence, upon his lifelong trick of intense reflexion: which friendly test indeed was to bring him out, through winding passages, through alternations of darkness and light very much *in* Paris, but with the surrounding scene itself a minor matter, a mere symbol for more things than had been dreamt of in the philosophy of Woollett. Another surrounding scene would have done as well for our show could it have represented a place in which Strether's errand was likely to lie and his crisis to await him. The *likely* place had the great merit of sparing me preparations; there would have been too many involved—not at all impossibilities, only rather worrying and delaying difficulties —in positing elsewhere Chad Newsome's interesting relation, his so interesting complexity of relations. Strether's appointed stage, in fine, could be but Chad's most luckily selected one. The young man had gone in, as they say, for circumjacent charm; and where he would have found it, by the turn of his mind, most 'authentic', was where his earnest friend's analysis would most find *him*; as well as where, for that matter, the former's whole analytic faculty would be led such a wonderful dance.

'The Ambassadors' had been, all conveniently, 'arranged for'; its first appearance was from month to month, in 'The North American Review' during 1903, and I had been open from far back to any pleasant provocation for ingenuity that might reside in one's actively adopting—so as to make it, in its way, a small compositional law—recurrent breaks and resumptions. I had made up my mind here regularly to exploit and enjoy these often rather rude jolts—having found, as I believed, an admirable way to it; yet every question of form and pressure, I easily remember, paled in the light of the major propriety, recognised as soon as really weighed; that of employing but one centre and keeping it

all within my hero's compass. The thing was to be so much this worthy's intimate adventure that even the projection of his consciousness upon it from beginning to end without intermission or deviation would probably still leave a part of its value for him, and *a fortiori* for ourselves, unexpressed. I might, however, express every grain of it that there would be room for—on condition of contriving a splendid particular economy. Other persons in no small number were to people the scene, and each with his or her axe to grind, his or her situation to treat, his or her coherency not to fail of, his or her relation to my leading motive, in a word, to establish and carry on. But Strether's sense of these things, and Strether's only, should avail me for showing them; I should know them but through his more or less groping knowledge of them, since his very gropings would figure among his most interesting motions, and a full observance of the rich rigour I speak of would give me more of the effect I should be most 'after' than all other possible observance together. It would give me a large unity, and that in turn would crown me with the grace to which the enlightened story-teller will at any time, for his interest, sacrifice if need be all other graces whatever. I refer of course to the grace of intensity, which there are ways of signally achieving and ways of signally missing—as we see it, all round us, helplessly and woefully missed. Not that it isn't, on the other hand, a virtue eminently subject to appreciation—there being no strict, no absolute measure of it; so that one may hear it acclaimed where it has quite escaped one's perception, and see it unnoticed where one has gratefully hailed it. After all of which I am not sure, either, that the immense amusement of the whole cluster of difficulties so arrayed may not operate, for the fond fabulist, when judicious not less than fond, as his best of determinants. That charming principle is always there, at all events, to keep interest fresh: it is a principle we remember, essentially ravenous, without scruple and without mercy, appeased with no cheap nor easy nourishment. It enjoys the costly sacrifice and rejoices thereby in the very odour of difficulty—even as ogres, with their

'Fee-faw-fum!' rejoice in the smell of the blood of Englishmen.

Thus it was, at all events, that the ultimate, though after all so speedy, definition of my gentleman's job—his coming out, all solemnly appointed and deputed, to 'save' Chad, and his then finding the young man so disobligingly and, at first, so bewilderingly not lost that a new issue altogether, in the connexion, prodigiously faces them, which has to be dealt with in a new light—promised as many calls on ingenuity and on the higher branches of the compositional art as one could possibly desire. Again and yet again, as, from book to book, I proceed with my survey, I find no source of interest equal to this verification after the fact, as I may call it, and the more in detail the better, of the scheme of consistency 'gone in' for. As always—since the charm never fails—the retracing of the process from point to point brings back the old illusion. The old intentions bloom again and flower —in spite of all the blossoms they were to have dropped by the way. This is the charm, as I say, of adventure *transposed* —the thrilling ups and downs, the intricate ins and outs of the compositional problem, made after such a fashion admirably objective, becoming the question at issue and keeping the author's heart in his mouth. Such an element, for instance, as his intention that Mrs Newsome, away off with her finger on the pulse of Massachusetts, should yet be no less intensely than circuitously present through the whole thing, should be no less felt as to be reckoned with than the most direct exhibition, the finest portrayal at first hand could make her, such a sign of artistic good faith, I say, once it's unmistakably there, takes on again an actuality not too much impaired by the comparative dimness of the particular success. Cherished intention too inevitably acts and operates, in the book, about fifty times as little as I had fondly dreamt it might; but that scarce spoils for me the pleasure of recognising the fifty ways in which I had sought to provide for it. The mere charm of seeing such an idea constituent, in its degree; the fineness of the measures taken—a real extension, if successful, of the very terms and possibilities of representa-

tion and figuration—such things alone were, after this fashion, inspiring, such things alone were a gage of the probable success of that dissimulated calculation with which the whole effort was to square. But oh the cares begotten, none the less, of that same 'judicious' sacrifice to a particular form of interest! One's work should have composition, because composition alone is positive beauty; but all the while —apart from one's inevitable consciousness too of the dire paucity of readers ever recognising or ever missing positive beauty—how, as to the cheap and easy, at every turn, how, as to immediacy and facility, and even as to the commoner vivacity, positive beauty might have to be sweated for and paid for! Once achieved and installed it may always be trusted to make the poor seeker feel he would have blushed to the roots of his hair for failing of it; yet, how, as its virtue can be essentially but the virtue of the whole, the wayside traps set in the interest of muddlement and pleading but the cause of the moment, of the particular bit in itself, have to be kicked out of the path! All the sophistications in life, for example, might have appeared to muster on behalf of the menace—the menace to a bright variety—involved in Strether's having all the subjective 'say', as it were, to himself.

Had I meanwhile made him at once hero and historian, endowed him with the romantic privilege of the 'first person' —the darkest abyss of romance this, inveterately, when enjoyed on the grand scale—variety, and many other queer matters as well, might have been smuggled in by a back door. Suffice it, to be brief, that the first person, in the long piece, is a form foredoomed to looseness, and that looseness, never much my affair, had never been so little so as on this particular occasion. All of which reflexions flocked to the standard from the moment—a very early one—the question of how to keep my form amusing while sticking so close to my central figure and constantly taking its pattern from him had to be faced. He arrives (arrives at Chester) as for the dreadful purpose of giving his creator 'no end' to tell about him—before which rigorous mission the serenest of creators

might well have quailed. I was far from the serenest; I was more than agitated enough to reflect that, grimly deprived of one alternative or one substitute for 'telling', I must address myself tooth and nail to another. I couldn't, save by implication, make other persons tell *each other* about him —blest resource, blest necessity, of the drama, which reaches its effects of unity, all remarkably, by paths absolutely opposite to the paths of the novel: with other persons, save as they were primarily *his* persons (not he primarily but one of theirs), I had simply nothing to do. I had relations for him none the less, by the mercy of Providence, quite as much as if my exhibition *was* to be a muddle; if I could only by implication and a show of consequence make other persons tell each other about him, I could at least make him tell *them* whatever in the world he must; and could so, by the same token—which was a further luxury thrown in—see straight into the deep differences between what that could do for me, or at all events for *him*, and the large ease of 'autobiography'. It may be asked why, if one so keeps to one's hero, one shouldn't make a single mouthful of 'method', shouldn't throw the reins on his neck and, letting them flap there as free as in 'Gil Blas' or in 'David Copperfield', equip him with the double privilege of subject and object—a course that has at least the merit of brushing away questions at a sweep. The answer to which is, I think, that one makes that surrender only if one is prepared *not* to make certain precious discriminations.

The 'first person' then, so employed, is addressed by the author directly to ourselves, his possible readers, whom he has to reckon with, at the best, by our English tradition, so loosely and vaguely after all, so little respectfully, on so scant a presumption of exposure to criticism. Strether, on the other hand, encaged and provided for as 'The Ambassadors' encages and provides, has to keep in view proprieties much stiffer and more salutary than any our straight and credulous gape are likely to bring home to him, has exhibitional conditions to meet, in a word, that forbid the terrible *fluidity* of self-revelation. I may seem not to better the case

for my discrimination if I say that, for my first care, I had thus inevitably to set him up a confidant or two, to wave away with energy the custom of the seated mass of explanation after the fact, the inserted block of merely referential narrative, which flourishes so, to the shame of the modern impatience, on the serried page of Balzac, but which seems simply to appal our actual, our general weaker, digestion. 'Harking back to make up' took at any rate more doing, as the phrase is, not only than the reader of to-day demands, but than he will tolerate at any price any call upon him either to understand or remotely to measure; and for the beauty of the thing when done the current editorial mind in particular appears wholly without sense. It is not, however, primarily for either of these reasons, whatever their weight, that Strether's friend Waymarsh is so keenly clutched at, on the threshold of the book, or that no less a pounce is made on Maria Gostrey—without even the pretext, either, of *her* being, in essence, Strether's friend. She is the reader's friend much rather—in consequence of dispositions that make him so eminently require one; and she acts in that capacity, and *really* in that capacity alone, with exemplary devotion, from beginning to end of the book. She is an enrolled, a direct, aid to lucidity; she is in fine, to tear off her mask, the most unmitigated and abandoned of *ficelles*. Half the dramatist's art, as we well know—since if we don't it's not the fault of the proofs that lie scattered about us—is in the use of *ficelles*; by which I mean in a deep dissimulation of his dependence on them. Waymarsh only to a slighter degree belongs, in the whole business, less to my subject than to my treatment of it; the interesting proof, in these connexions, being that one has but to take one's subject for the stuff of drama to interweave with enthusiasm as many Gostreys as need be.

The material of 'The Ambassadors', conforming in this respect exactly to that of 'The Wings of the Dove', published just before it, is taken absolutely for the stuff of drama; so that, availing myself of the opportunity given me by this edition for some prefatory remarks on the latter

work, I had mainly to make on its behalf the point of its scenic consistency. It disguises that virtue, in the oddest way in the world, by just *looking*, as we turn its pages, as little scenic as possible; but it sharply divides itself, just as the composition before us does, into the parts that prepare, that tend in fact to over-prepare, for scenes, and the parts, or otherwise into the scenes, that justify and crown the preparation. It may definitely be said, I think, that everything in it that is not scene (not, I of course mean, complete and functional scene, treating *all* the submitted matter, as by logical start, logical turn, and logical finish) is discriminated preparation, is the fusion and synthesis of picture. These alterations propose themselves all recognisably, I think, from an early stage, as the very form and figure of 'The Ambassadors'; so that, to repeat, such an agent as Miss Gostrey, pre-engaged at a high salary, but waits in the draughty wing with her shawl and her smelling-salts. Her function speaks at once for itself, and by the time she has dined with Strether in London and gone to a play with him her intervention as a *ficelle* is, I hold, expertly justified. Thanks to it we have treated scenically, and scenically alone, the whole lumpish question of Strether's 'past', which has seen us more happily on the way than anything else could have done; we have strained to a high lucidity and vivacity (or at least we hope we have) certain indispensable facts; we have seen our two or three immediate friends all conveniently and profitably in 'action'; to say nothing of our beginning to descry others, of a remoter intensity, getting into motion, even if a bit vaguely as yet, for our further enrichment. Let my first point be here that the scene in question, that in which the whole situation at Woollett and the complex forces that have propelled my hero to where this lively extractor of his value and distiller of his essence awaits him, is normal and entire, is really an excellent *standard* scene; copious, comprehensive, and accordingly never short, but with its office as definite as that of the hammer on the gong of the clock, the office of expressing *all that is in* the hour.

The '*ficelle*' character of the subordinate party is as artfully dissimulated, throughout, as may be, and to that extent that, with the seams or joints of Maria Gostrey's ostensible connectedness taken particular care of, duly smoothed over, that is, and anxiously kept from showing as 'pieced on', this figure doubtless achieves, after a fashion, something of the dignity of a prime idea: which circumstance but shows us afresh how many quite incalculable but none the less clear sources of enjoyment for the infatuated artist, how many copious springs of our never-to-be-slighted 'fun' for the reader and critic susceptible of contagion, may sound their incidental plash as soon as an artistic process begins to enjoy free development. Exquisite—in illustration of this—the mere interest and amusement of such at once 'creative' and critical questions as how and where and why to make Miss Gostrey's false connexion carry itself, under a due high polish, as a real one. Nowhere is it more of an artful expedient for mere consistency of form, to mention a case, than in the last 'scene' of the book, where its function is to give or to add nothing whatever, but only to express as vividly as possible certain things quite other than itself and that are of the already fixed and appointed measure. Since, however, all art is *expression*, and is thereby vividness, one was to find the door open here to any amount of delightful dissimulation. These verily are the refinements and ecstasies of method—amid which, or certainly under the influence of any exhilarated demonstration of which, one must keep one's head and not lose one's way. To cultivate an adequate intelligence for them and to make that sense operative is positively to find a charm in any produced ambiguity of appearance that is not by the same stroke, and all helplessly, an ambiguity of sense. To project imaginatively, for my hero, a relation that has nothing to do with the matter (the matter of my subject) but has everything to do with the manner (the manner of my presentation of the same) and yet to treat it, at close quarters and for fully economic expression's possible sake, as if it were important and essential—to do that sort of thing and yet muddle nothing may easily become, as

one goes, a signally attaching proposition; even though it all remains but part and parcel, I hasten to recognise, of the merely general and related question of expressional curiosity and expressional decency.

I am moved to add after so much insistence on the scenic side of my labour that I have found the steps of re-perusal almost as much waylaid here by quite another style of effort in the same signal interest—or have in other words not failed to note how, even so associated and so discriminated, the finest properties and charms of the non-scenic may, under the right hand for them, still keep their intelligibility and assert their office. Infinitely suggestive such an observation as this last on the whole delightful head, where representation is concerned, of possible variety, of effective expressional change and contrast. One would like, at such an hour as this, for critical licence, to go into the matter of the noted inevitable deviation (from too fond an original vision) that the exquisite treachery even of the straightest execution may ever be trusted to inflict even on the most mature plan—the case being that, though one's last reconsidered production always seems to bristle with that particular evidence, 'The Ambassadors' would place a flood of such light at my service. I must attach to my final remark here a different import; noting in the other connexion I just glanced at such passages as that of my hero's first encounter with Chad Newsome, absolute attestations of the non-scenic form though they be, yet lay the firmest hand too—so far at least as intention goes—on representational effect. To report at all closely and completely of what 'passes' on a given occasion is inevitably to become more or less scenic; and yet in the instance I allude to, *with* the conveyance, expressional curiosity and expressional decency are sought and arrived at under quite another law. The true inwardness of this may be at bottom but that one of the suffered treacheries has consisted precisely, for Chad's whole figure and presence, of a direct presentability diminished and compromised—despoiled, that is, of its *proportional* advantage; so that, in a word, the whole economy of his author's relation to him has

at important points to be redetermined. The book, however, critically viewed, is touchingly full of these disguised and repaired losses, these insidious recoveries, these intensely redemptive consistencies. The pages in which Mamie Pocock gives her appointed and, I can't but think, duly felt lift to the whole action by the so inscrutably-applied side-stroke or short-cut of our just watching, and as quite at an angle of vision as yet untried, her single hour of suspense in the hotel salon, in our partaking of her concentrated study of the sense of matters bearing on her own case, all the bright warm Paris afternoon, from the balcony that overlooks the Tuileries garden—these are as marked an example of the representational virtue that insists here and there on being, for the charm of opposition and renewal, other than the scenic. It wouldn't take much to make me further argue that from an equal play of such oppositions the book gathers an intensity that fairly adds to the dramatic—though the latter is supposed to be the sum of all intensities; or that has at any rate nothing to fear from juxtaposition with it. I consciously fail to shrink in fact from that extravagance—I risk it, rather, for the sake of the moral involved; which is not that the particular production before us exhausts the interesting questions it raises, but that the Novel remains still, under the right persuasion, the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms.

HENRY JAMES

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BOOK FIRST

I

STRETHER'S FIRST question, when he reached the hotel, was about his friend; yet on his learning that Waymarsh was apparently not to arrive till evening he was not wholly disconcerted. A telegram from him bespeaking a room 'only if not noisy', reply paid, was produced for the enquirer at the office, so that the understanding they should meet at Chester rather than at Liverpool remained to that extent sound. The same secret principle, however, that had prompted Strether not absolutely to desire Waymarsh's presence at the dock, that had led him thus to postpone for a few hours his enjoyment of it, now operated to make him feel he could still wait without disappointment. They would dine together at the worst, and, with all respect to dear old Waymarsh—if not even, for that matter, to himself—there was little fear that in the sequel they shouldn't see enough of each other. The principle I have just mentioned as operating had been, with the most newly disembarked of the two men, wholly instinctive—the fruit of a sharp sense that, delightful as it would be to find himself looking, after so much separation, into his comrade's face, his business would be a trifle bungled should he simply arrange for this countenance to present itself to the nearing steamer as the first 'note' of Europe. Mixed with everything was the apprehension, already, on Strether's part, that it would, at best, throughout, prove the note of Europe in quite a sufficient degree.

That note had been meanwhile—since the previous afternoon, thanks to this happier device—such a consciousness of personal freedom as he hadn't known for years; such a deep taste of change and of having above all for the moment

nobody and nothing to consider, as promised already, if headlong hope were not too foolish, to colour his adventure with cool success. There were people on the ship with whom he had easily consorted—so far as ease could up to now be imputed to him—and who for the most part plunged straight into the current that set from the landing-stage to London; there were others who had invited him to a tryst at the inn and had even invoked his aid for a 'look round' at the beauties of Liverpool; but he had stolen away from every one alike, had kept no appointment and renewed no acquaintance, had been indifferently aware of the number of persons who esteemed themselves fortunate in being, unlike himself, 'met', and had even independently, unsociably, alone, without encounter or relapse and by mere quiet evasion, given his afternoon and evening to the immediate and the sensible. They formed a qualified draught of Europe, an afternoon and an evening on the banks of the Mersey, but such as it was he took his potion at least undiluted. He winced a little, truly, at the thought that Waymarsh might be already at Chester; he reflected that, should he have to describe himself there as having 'got in' so early, it would be difficult to make the interval look particularly eager; but he was like a man who, elatedly finding in his pocket more money than usual, handles it a while and idly and pleasantly chinks it before addressing himself to the business of spending. That he was prepared to be vague to Waymarsh about the hour of the ship's touching, and that he both wanted extremely to see him and enjoyed extremely the duration of delay—these things, it is to be conceived, were early signs in him that his relation to his actual errand might prove none of the simplest. He was burdened, poor Strether—it had better be confessed at the outset—with the oddity of a double consciousness. There was detachment in his zeal and curiosity in his indifference,

After the young woman in the glass cage had held up to him across her counter the pale-pink leaflet bearing his friend's name, which she neatly pronounced, he turned away to find himself, in the hall, facing a lady who met his eyes

as with an intention suddenly determined, and whose features—not freshly young, not markedly fine, but on happy terms with each other—came back to him as from a recent vision. For a moment they stood confronted; then the moment placed her: he had noticed her the day before, noticed her at his previous inn, where—again in the hall—she had been briefly engaged with some people of his own ship's company. Nothing had actually passed between them, and he would as little have been able to say what had been the sign of her face for him on the first occasion as to name the ground of his present recognition. Recognition at any rate appeared to prevail on her own side as well—which would only have added to the mystery. All she now began by saying to him nevertheless was that, having chanced to catch his enquiry, she was moved to ask, by his leave, if it were possibly a question of Mr Waymarsh of Milrose, Connecticut—Mr Waymarsh the American lawyer.

'Oh yes,' he replied, 'my very well-known friend. He's to meet me here, coming up from Malvern, and I supposed he'd already have arrived. But he doesn't come till later, and I'm relieved not to have kept him. Do you know him?' Strether wound up.

It wasn't till after he had spoken that he became aware of how much there had been in him of response; when the tone of her own rejoinder, as well as the play of something more in her face—something more, that is, than its apparently usual restless light—seemed to notify him. 'I've met him at Milrose—where I used sometimes, a good while ago, to stay; I had friends there who were friends of his, and I've been at his house. I won't answer for it that he would know me,' Strether's new acquaintance pursued; 'but I should be delighted to see him. Perhaps,' she added, 'I shall —for I'm staying over.' She paused while our friend took in these things, and it was as if a good deal of talk had already passed. They even vaguely smiled at it, and Strether presently observed that Mr Waymarsh would, no doubt, be easily to be seen. This, however, appeared to affect the lady as if she might have advanced too far. She appeared to have

no reserves about anything. 'Oh,' she said, 'he won't care!' —and she immediately thereupon remarked that she believed Strether knew the Munsters; the Munsters being the people he had seen her with at Liverpool.

But he didn't, it happened, know the Munsters well enough to give the case much of a lift; so that they were left together as if over the mere laid table of conversation. Her qualification of the mentioned connexion had rather removed than placed a dish, and there seemed nothing else to serve. Their attitude remained, none the less, that of not forsaking the board; and the effect of this in turn was to give them the appearance of having accepted each other with an absence of preliminaries practically complete. They moved along the hall together, and Strether's companion threw off that the hotel had the advantage of a garden. He was aware by this time of his strange inconsequence: he had shirked the intimacies of the steamer and had muffled the shock of Waymarsh only to find himself forsaken, in this sudden case, both of avoidance and of caution. He passed, under this unsought protection and before he had so much as gone up to his room, into the garden of the hotel, and at the end of ten minutes had agreed to meet there again, as soon as he should have made himself tidy, the dispenser of such good assurances. He wanted to look at the town, and they would forthwith look together. It was almost as if she had been in possession and received him as a guest. Her acquaintance with the place presented her in a manner as a hostess, and Strether had a rueful glance for the lady in the glass cage. It was as if this personage had seen herself instantly superseded.

When in a quarter of an hour he came down, what his hostess saw, what she might have taken in with a vision kindly adjusted, was the lean, the slightly loose figure of a man of the middle height and something more perhaps than the middle age—a man of five-and-fifty, whose most immediate signs were a marked bloodless brownness of face, a thick dark moustache, of characteristically American cut, growing strong and falling low, a head of hair still abundant

but irregularly streaked with grey, and a nose of bold free prominence, the even line, the high finish, as it might have been called, of which had a certain effect of mitigation. A perpetual pair of glasses astride of this fine ridge, and a line, unusually deep and drawn, the prolonged pen-stroke of time, accompanying the curve of the moustache from nostril to chin, did something to complete the facial furniture that an attentive observer would have seen catalogued, on the spot, in the vision of the other party to Strether's appointment. She waited for him in the garden, the other party, drawing on a pair of singularly fresh soft and elastic light gloves and presenting herself with a superficial readiness which, as he approached her over the small smooth lawn and in the watery English sunshine, he might, with his rougher preparation, have marked as the model for such an occasion. She had, this lady, a perfect plain propriety, an expensive subdued suitability, that her companion was not free to analyse, but that struck him, so that his consciousness of it was instantly acute, as a quality quite new to him. Before reaching her he stopped on the grass and went through the form of feeling for something, possibly forgotten, in the light overcoat he carried on his arm; yet the essence of the act was no more than the impulse to gain time. Nothing could have been odder than Strether's sense of himself as at that moment launched in something of which the sense would be quite disconnected from the sense of his past and which was literally beginning there and then. It had begun in fact already upstairs and before the dressing-glass that struck him as blocking further, so strangely, the dimness of the window of his dull bedroom; begun with a sharper survey of the elements of Appearance than he had for a long time been moved to make. He had during those moments felt these elements to be not so much to his hand as he should have liked, and then had fallen back on the thought that they were precisely a matter as to which help was supposed to come from what he was about to do. He was about to go up to London, so that hat and necktie might wait. What had come as straight to him as a ball

in a well-played game—and caught moreover not less neatly —was just the air, in the person of his friend, of having seen and chosen, the air of achieved possession of those vague qualities and quantities that collectively figured to him as the advantage snatched from lucky chances. Without pomp or circumstance, certainly, as her original address to him, equally with his own response, had been, he would have sketched to himself his impression of her as: 'Well, she's more thoroughly civilised——!' If 'More thoroughly than *whom?*' would not have been for him a sequel to this remark, that was just by reason of his deep consciousness of the bearing of his comparison.

The amusement, at all events, of a civilisation intenser was what—familiar compatriot as she was, with the full tone of the compatriot and the rattling link not with mystery but only with dear dyspeptic Waymarsh—she appeared distinctly to promise. His pause while he felt in his overcoat was positively the pause of confidence, and it enabled his eyes to make out as much of a case for her, in proportion, as her own made out for himself. She affected him as almost insolently young; but an easily carried five-and-thirty could still do that. She was, however, like himself, marked and wan; only it naturally couldn't have been known to him how much a spectator looking from one to the other might have discerned that they had in common. It wouldn't for such a spectator have been altogether insupposable that, each so finely brown and so sharply spare, each confessing so to dents of surface and aids to sight, to a disproportionate nose and a head delicately or grossly grizzled, they might have been brother and sister. On this ground indeed there would have been a residuum of difference; such a sister having surely known in respect to such a brother the extremity of separation, and such a brother now feeling in respect to such a sister the extremity of surprise. Surprise, it was true, was not on the other hand what the eyes of Strether's friend most showed him while she gave him, stroking her gloves smoother, the time he appreciated. They had taken hold of him straightway, measuring him up and

down as if they knew how; as if he were human material they had already in some sort handled. Their possessor was in truth, it may be communicated, the mistress of a hundred cases or categories, receptacles of the mind, subdivisions for convenience, in which, from a full experience, she pigeon-holed her fellow mortals with a hand as free as that of a compositor scattering type. She was as equipped in this particular as Strether was the reverse, and it made an opposition between them which he might well have shrunk from submitting to if he had fully suspected it. So far as he did suspect it he was on the contrary, after a short shake of his consciousness, as pleasantly passive as might be. He really had a sort of sense of what she knew. He had quite the sense that she knew things he didn't, and though this was a concession that in general he found not easy to make to women, he made it now as good-humouredly as if it lifted a burden. His eyes were so quiet behind his eternal nippers that they might almost have been absent without changing his face, which took its expression mainly, and not least its stamp of sensibility from other sources, surface and grain and form. He joined his guide in an instant, and then felt she had profited still better than he by his having been, for the moments just mentioned, so at the disposal of her intelligence. She knew even intimate things about him that he hadn't yet told her and perhaps never would. He wasn't unaware that he had told her rather remarkably many for the time, but these were not the real ones. Some of the real ones however, precisely, were what she knew.

They were to pass again through the hall of the inn to get into the street, and it was here she presently checked him with a question. 'Have you looked up my name?'

He could only stop with a laugh. 'Have you looked up mine?'

'Oh dear, yes—as soon as you left me. I went to the office and asked. Hadn't *you* better do the same?'

He wondered. 'Find out who you are?—after the uplifted young woman there has seen us thus scrape acquaintance!'

She laughed on her side now at the shade of alarm in his

amusement. 'Isn't it a reason the more? If what you're afraid of is the injury for me—my being seen to walk off with a gentleman who has to ask who I am—I assure you I don't in the least mind. Here, however,' she continued, 'is my card, and as I find there's something else again I have to say at the office, you can just study it during the moment I leave you.'

She left him after he had taken from her the small pasteboard she had extracted from her pocket-book, and he had extracted another from his own, to exchange with it, before she came back. He read thus the simple designation 'Maria Gostrey', to which was attached, in a corner of the card, with a number, the name of a street, presumably in Paris, without other appreciable identity than its foreignness. He put the card into his waistcoat pocket, keeping his own meanwhile in evidence; and as he leaned against the doorpost he met with the smile of a straying thought what the expanse before the hotel offered to his view. It was positively droll to him that he should already have Maria Gostrey, whoever she was—of which he hadn't really the least idea—in a place of safe keeping. He had somehow an assurance that he should carefully preserve the little token he had just tucked in. He gazed with unseeing lingering eyes as he followed some of the implications of his act, asking himself if he really felt admonished to qualify it as disloyal. It was prompt, it was possibly even premature, and there was little doubt of the expression of face the sight of it would have produced in a certain person. But if it were 'wrong'—why then he had better not have come out at all. At this, poor man, had he already—and even before meeting Waymarsh —arrived. He had believed he had a limit, but the limit had been transcended within thirty-six hours. By how long a space on the plane of manners, or even of morals, moreover, he felt still more sharply after Maria Gostrey had come back to him and with a gay decisive 'So now—!' led him forth into the world. This counted, it struck him as he walked beside her with his overcoat on an arm, his umbrella under another and his personal pasteboard a little stiffly retained

between forefinger and thumb, this struck him as really, in comparison, his introduction to things. It hadn't been 'Europe' at Liverpool, no—not even in the dreadful delightful impressive streets the night before—to the extent his present companion made it so. She hadn't yet done that so much as when after their walk had lasted a few minutes and he had had time to wonder if a couple of sidelong glances from her meant that he had best have put on gloves, she almost pulled him up with an amused challenge. 'But why—fondly as it's so easy to imagine your clinging to it—don't you put it away? Or if it's an inconvenience to you to carry it, one's often glad to have one's card back. The fortunes one spends in them!'

Then he saw both that his way of marching with his own prepared tribute had affected her as a deviation in one of those directions he couldn't yet measure, and that she supposed this emblem to be still the one he had received from her. He accordingly handed her the card as if in restitution, but as soon as she had it she felt the difference and, with her eyes on it, stopped short for apology. 'I like,' she observed, 'your name.'

'Oh,' he answered, 'you won't have heard of it!' Yet he had his reasons for not being sure but that she perhaps might.

Ah it was but too visible! She read it over again as one who had never seen it. 'Mr Lewis Lambert Strether'—she sounded it almost as freely as for any stranger. She repeated, however, that she liked it—'particularly the Lewis Lambert. It's the name of a novel of Balzac's.'

'Oh I know that!' said Strether.

'But the novel's an awfully bad one.'

'I know that too,' Strether smiled. To which he added with an irrelevance that was only superficial: 'I come from Woollett, Massachusetts.' It made her for some reason—the irrelevance or whatever—laugh. Balzac had described many cities, but hadn't described Woollett, Massachusetts. 'You say that,' she returned, 'as if you wanted one immediately to know the worst.'

'Oh I think it's a thing,' he said, 'that you must already have made out. I feel it so that I certainly must look it, speak it, and, as people say there, "act" it. It sticks out of me, and you knew surely for yourself as soon as you looked at me.'

'The worst, you mean?'

'Well, the fact of where I come from. There at any rate it *is*; so that you won't be able, if anything happens, to say that I've not been straight with you.'

'I see'—and Miss Gostrey looked really interested in the point he had made. 'But what do you think of as happening?'

Though he wasn't shy—which was rather anomalous—Strether gazed about without meeting her eyes; a motion that was frequent with him in talk, yet of which his words often seemed not at all the effect. 'Why that you should find me too hopeless.' With which they walked on again together while she answered, as they went, that the most 'hopeless' of her countryfolk were in general precisely those she liked best. All sorts of other pleasant small things—small things that were yet large for him—flowered in the air of the occasion; but the bearing of the occasion itself on matters still remote concerns us too closely to permit us to multiply our illustrations. Two or three, however, in truth, we should perhaps regret to lose. The tortuous wall—girdle, long since snapped, of the little swollen city, half held in place by careful civic hands—wanders in narrow file between parapets smoothed by peaceful generations, pausing here and there for a dismantled gate or a bridged gap, with rises and drops, steps up and steps down, queer twists, queer contacts, peeps into homely streets and under the brows of gables, views of cathedral tower and waterside fields, of huddled English town and ordered English country. Too deep almost for words was the delight of these things to Strether; yet as deeply mixed with it were certain images of his inward picture. He had trod this walk in the far-off time, at twenty-five; but that, instead of spoiling it, only enriched it for present feeling and marked his renewal

as a thing substantial enough to share. It was with Waymarsh he should have shared it, and he was now accordingly taking from him something that was his due. He looked repeatedly at his watch, and when he had done so for the fifth time Miss Gostrey took him up.

'You're doing something that you think not right.'

It so touched the place that he quite changed colour and his laugh grew almost awkward. 'Am I enjoying it as much as *that*?'

'You're not enjoying it, I think, so much as you ought.'

'I see'—he appeared thoughtfully to agree. 'Great is my privilege.'

'Oh it's not your privilege! It has nothing to do with *me*. It has to do with yourself. Your failure's general.'

'Ah there you are!' he laughed. 'It's the failure of Woollett. *That's* general.'

'The failure to enjoy,' Miss Gostrey explained, 'is what I mean.'

'Precisely. Woollett isn't sure it ought to enjoy. If it were it would. But it hasn't, poor thing,' Strether continued, 'any one to show it how. It's not like me. I have somebody.'

They had stopped, in the afternoon sunshine—constantly pausing, in their stroll, for the sharper sense of what they saw—and Strether rested on one of the high sides of the old stony groove of the little rampart. He leaned back on this support with his face to the tower of the cathedral, now admirably commanded by their station, the high red-brown mass, square and subordinately spired and crocketed, retouched and restored, but charming to his long-sealed eyes and with the first swallows of the year weaving their flight all round it. Miss Gostrey lingered near him, full of an air, to which she more and more justified her right, of understanding and effect of things. She quite concurred. 'You've indeed somebody.' And she added: 'I wish you *would* let me show you how!'

'Oh I'm afraid of you!'.he cheerfully pleaded.

She kept on him a moment, through her glasses and through his own, a certain pleasant pointedness. 'Ah no,

you're not! You're not in the least, thank goodness! If you had been we shouldn't so soon have found ourselves here together. I think,' she comfortably concluded, 'you trust me.'

'I think I do!—but that's exactly what I'm afraid of. I shouldn't mind if I didn't. It's falling thus in twenty minutes so utterly into your hands. I dare say,' Strether continued, 'it's a sort of thing you're thoroughly familiar with; but nothing more extraordinary has ever happened to me.'

She watched him with all her kindness. 'That means simply that you've recognised me—which *is* rather beautiful and rare. You see what I am.' As on this, however, he protested, with a good-humoured headshake, a resignation of any such a claim, she had a moment of explanation. 'If you'll only come on further as you *have* come you'll at any rate make out. My own fate has been too many for me, and I've succumbed to it. I'm a general guide—to "Europe", don't you know? I wait for people—I put them through. I pick them up—I set them down. I'm a sort of superior "courier-maid". I'm a companion at large. I take people, as I've told you, about. I never sought it—it has come to me. It has been my fate, and one's fate one accepts. It's a dreadful thing to have to say, in so wicked a world, but I verily believe that, such as you see me, there's nothing I don't know. I know all the shops and the prices—but I know worse things still. I bear on my back the huge load of our national consciousness, or, in other words—for it comes to that—of our nation itself. Of what is our nation composed but of the men and women individually on my shoulders? I don't do it, you know, for any particular advantage. I don't do it, for instance—some people do, you know—for money.'

Strether could only listen and wonder and weigh his chance. 'And yet, affected as you are then to so many of your clients, you can scarcely be said to do it for love.' He waited a moment. 'How do we reward you?'

She had her own hesitation, but 'You don't!' she finally returned, setting him again in motion. They went on, but in a few minutes, though while still thinking over what she had said, he once more took out his watch; mechanically,

unconsciously and as if made nervous by the mere exhilaration of what struck him as her strange and cynical wit. He looked at the hour without seeing it, and then, on something again said by his companion, had another pause. 'You're really in terror of him.'

He smiled a smile that he almost felt to be sickly. 'Now you can see why I'm afraid of you.'

'Because I've such illuminations? Why, they're all for your help! It's what I told you,' she added, 'just now. You feel as if this were wrong.'

He fell back once more, settling himself against the parapet as if to hear more about it. 'Then get me out!'

Her face fairly brightened for the joy of the appeal, but, as if it were a question of immediate action, she visibly considered. 'Out of waiting for him?—of seeing him at all?'

'Oh no—not that,' said poor Strether, looking grave. 'I've got to wait for him—and I want very much to see him. But out of the terror. You did put your finger on it a few minutes ago. It's general, but it avails itself of particular occasions. That's what it's doing for me now. I'm always considering something else; something else, I mean, than the thing of the moment. The obsession of the other thing is the terror. I'm considering at present for instance something else than *you*.'

She listened with charming earnestness. 'Oh you oughtn't to do that!'

'It's what I admit. Make it then impossible.'

She continued to think. 'Is it really an "order" from you? —that I shall take the job? *Will* you give yourself up?'

Poor Strether heaved his sigh. 'If I only could! But that's the deuce of it—that I never can. No—I can't.'

She wasn't, however, discouraged. 'But you want to at least?'

'Oh unspeakably!'

'Ah then, if you'll try!'—and she took over the job, as she had called it, on the spot. 'Trust me!' she exclaimed; and the action of this, as they retraced their steps, was presently to make him pass his hand into her arm in the manner of a

benign dependent paternal old person who wishes to be 'nice' to a younger one. If he drew it out again indeed as they approached the inn this may have been because, after more talk had passed between them, the relation of age, or at least of experience—which, for that matter, had already played to and fro with some freedom—affected him as incurring a readjustment. It was at all events perhaps lucky that they arrived in sufficiently separate fashion within range of the hotel-door. The young lady they had left in the glass cage watched as if she had come to await them on the threshold. At her side stood a person equally interested, by his attitude, in their return, and the effect of the sight of whom was instantly to determine for Strether another of those responsive arrests that we have had so repeatedly to note. He left it to Miss Gostrey to name, with the fine full bravado, as it almost struck him, of her 'Mr Waymarsh!' what was to have been, what—he more than ever felt as his short stare of suspended welcome took things in—would have been, but for herself, his doom. It was already upon him even at that distance—Mr Waymarsh was for *his* part joyless.

II

HE HAD none the less to confess to this friend that evening that he knew almost nothing about her, and it was a deficiency that Waymarsh, even with his memory refreshed by contact, by her own prompt and lucid allusions and enquiries, by their having publicly partaken of dinner in her company, and by another stroll, to which she was not a stranger, out into the town to look at the cathedral by moonlight—it was a blank that the resident of Milrose, though admitting acquaintance with the Munsters, professed himself unable to fill. He had no recollection of Miss Gostrey, and two or three questions that she put to him about those members of his circle had, to Strether's observation, the

same effect he himself had already more directly felt—the effect of appearing to place all knowledge, for the time, on this original woman's side. It interested him indeed to mark the limits of any such relation for her with his friend as there could possibly be a question of, and it particularly struck him that they were to be marked altogether in Waymarsh's quarter. This added to his own sense of having gone far with her—gave him an early illustration of a much shorter course. There was a certitude he immediately grasped—a conviction that Waymarsh would quite fail, as it were, and on whatever degree of acquaintance, to profit by her.

There had been after the first interchange among the three a talk of some five minutes in the hall, and then the two men had adjourned to the garden, Miss Gostrey for the time disappearing. Strether in due course accompanied his friend to the room he had bespoken and had, before going out, scrupulously visited; where at the end of another half-hour he had no less discreetly left him. On leaving him he repaired straight to his own room, but with the prompt effect of feeling the compass of that chamber resented by his condition. There he enjoyed at once the first consequence of their reunion. A place was too small for him after it that had seemed large enough before. He had awaited it with something he would have been sorry, have been almost ashamed not to recognise as emotion, yet with a tacit assumption at the same time that emotion would in the event find itself relieved. The actual oddity was that he was only more excited; and his excitement—to which indeed he would have found it difficult instantly to give a name—brought him once more downstairs and caused him for some minutes vaguely to wander. He went once more to the garden; he looked into the public room, found Miss Gostrey writing letters and backed out; he roamed, fidgeted and wasted time; but he was to have his more intimate session with his friend before the evening closed.

It was late—not till Strether had spent an hour upstairs with him—that this subject consented to betake himself to doubtful rest. Dinner and the subsequent stroll by moon-

light—a dream, on Strether's part, of romantic effects rather prosaically merged in a mere missing of thicker coats—had measurably intervened, and this midnight conference was the result of Waymarsh's having (when they were free, as he put it, of their fashionable friend) found the smoking-room not quite what he wanted, and yet bed was what he wanted less. His most frequent form of words was that he knew himself, and they were applied on this occasion to his certainty of not sleeping. He knew himself well enough to know that he should have a night of prowling unless he should succeed, as a preliminary, in getting prodigiously tired. If the effort directed to this end involved till a late hour the presence of Strether—consisted, that is, in the detention of the latter for full discourse—there was yet an impression of minor discipline involved for our friend in the picture Waymarsh made as he sat in trousers and shirt on the edge of his couch. With his long legs extended and his large back much bent, he nursed, alternately, for an almost incredible time, his elbows and his beard. He struck his visitor as extremely, as almost wilfully uncomfortable; yet what had this been for Strether, from that first glimpse of him disconcerted in the porch of the hotel, but the predominant note? The discomfort was in a manner contagious, as well as also in a manner inconsequent and unfounded; the visitor felt that unless he should get used to it—or unless Waymarsh himself should—it would constitute a menace for his own prepared, his own already confirmed, consciousness of the agreeable. On their first going up together to the room Strether had selected for him Waymarsh had looked it over in silence with a sigh that represented for his companion, if not the habit of disapprobation, at least the despair of felicity; and this look had recurred to Strether as the key of much he had since observed. 'Europe', he had begun to gather from these things, had up to now rather failed of its message to him; he hadn't got into tune with it and had at the end of three months almost renounced any such expectation.

He really appeared at present to insist on that by just

perching there with the gas in his eyes. This of itself somehow conveyed the futility of single rectifications in a multiform failure. He had a large handsome head and a large sallow seamed face—a striking significant physiognomic total, the upper range of which, the great political brow, the thick loose hair, the dark fuliginous eyes, recalled even to a generation whose standard had dreadfully deviated the impressive image, familiar by engravings and busts, of some great national worthy of the earlier part of the mid-century. He was of the personal type—and it was an element in the power and promise that in their early time Strether had found in him—of the American statesman, the statesman trained in 'Congressional halls', of an elder day. The legend had been in later years that as the lower part of his face, which was weak and slightly crooked, spoiled the likeness, this was the real reason for the growth of his beard, which might have seemed to spoil it for those not in the secret. He shook his mane; he fixed, with his admirable eyes, his auditor or his observer; he wore no glasses and had a way, partly formidable, yet also partly encouraging, as from a representative to a constituent, of looking very hard at those who approached him. He met you as if you had knocked and he had bidden you enter. Strether, who hadn't seen him for so long an interval, apprehended him now with a freshness of taste, and had perhaps never done him such ideal justice. The head was bigger, the eyes finer, than they need have been for the career; but that only meant, after all, that the career was itself expressive. What it expressed at midnight in the gas-glaring bedroom at Chester was that the subject of it had, at the end of years, barely escaped, by flight in time, a general nervous collapse. But this very proof of the full life, as the full life was understood at Milrose, would have made to Strether's imagination an element in which Waymarsh could have floated easily had he only consented to float. Alas nothing so little resembled floating as the rigour with which, on the edge of his bed, he hugged his posture of prolonged impermanence. It suggested to his comrade something that always, when kept up, worried him

—a person established in a railway coach with a forward inclination. It represented the angle at which poor Waymarsh was to sit through the ordeal of Europe.

Thanks to the stress of occupation, the strain of professions, the absorption and embarrassment of each, they had not, at home, during years before this sudden brief and almost bewildering reign of comparative ease, found so much as a day for a meeting; a fact that was in some degree an explanation of the sharpness with which most of his friend's features stood out to Strether. Those he had lost sight of since the early time came back to him; others that it was never possible to forget struck him now as sitting, clustered and expectant, like a somewhat defiant family-group, on the door-step of their residence. The room was narrow for its length, and the occupant of the bed thrust so far a pair of slippered feet that the visitor had almost to step over them in his recurrent rebounds from his chair to fidget back and forth. There were marks the friends made on things to talk about, and on things not to, and one of the latter in particular fell like the tap of chalk on the blackboard. Married at thirty, Waymarsh had not lived with his wife for fifteen years, and it came up vividly between them in the glare of the gas that Strether wasn't to ask about her. He knew they were still separate and that she lived at hotels, travelled in Europe, painted her face and wrote her husband abusive letters, of not one of which, to a certainty, that sufferer spared himself the perusal; but he respected without difficulty the cold twilight that had settled on this side of his companion's life. It was a province in which mystery reigned and as to which Waymarsh had never spoken the informing word. Strether, who wanted to do him the highest justice wherever he *could* do it, singularly admired him for the dignity of this reserve, and even counted it as one of the grounds—grounds all handled and numbered—for ranking him, in the range of their acquaintance, as a success. He *was* a success, Waymarsh, in spite of overwork, of prostration, of sensible shrinkage, of his wife's letters and of his not liking Europe. Strether would have reckoned his own career less

futile had he been able to put into it anything so handsome as so much fine silence. One might one's self easily have left Mrs Waymarsh; and one would assuredly have paid one's tribute to the ideal in covering with that attitude the derision of having been left by her. Her husband had held his tongue and had made a large income; and these were in especial the achievements as to which Strether envied him. Our friend had had indeed, on his side too, a subject for silence, which he fully appreciated; but it was a matter of a different sort and the figure of the income he had arrived at had never been high enough to look any one in the face.

'I don't know as I quite see what you require it for. You don't appear sick to speak of.' It was of Europe that Waymarsh thus finally spoke.

'Well,' said Strether, who fell as much as possible into step. 'I guess I don't *feel* sick now that I've started. But I had pretty well run down before I did start.'

Waymarsh raised his melancholy look. 'Ain't you about up to your usual average?'

It was not quite pointedly sceptical, but it seemed somehow a plea for the purest veracity, and it thereby affected our friend as the very voice of Milrose. He had long since made a mental distinction—though never in truth daring to betray it—between the voice of Milrose and the voice even of Woollett. It was the former, he felt, that was most in the real tradition. There had been occasions in his past when the sound of it had reduced him to temporary confusion, and the present, for some reason, suddenly became such another. It was nevertheless no light matter that the very effect of his confusion should be to make him again prevaricate. 'That description hardly does justice to a man to whom it has done such a lot of good to see *you*.'

Waymarsh fixed on his washing-stand the silent detached stare with which Milrose in person, as it were, might have marked the unexpectedness of a compliment from Woollett; and Strether, for his part, felt once more like Woollett in person. 'I mean,' his friend presently continued, 'that your appearance isn't as bad as I've seen it: it compares favour-

ably with what it was when I last noticed it.' On this appearance Waymarsh's eyes yet failed to rest; it was almost as if they obeyed an instinct of propriety, and the effect was still stronger when, always considering the basin and jug, he added. 'You've filled out some since then.'

'I'm afraid I have,' Strether laughed: 'one does fill some with all one takes in, and I've taken in, I dare say, more than I've natural room for. I was dog-tired when I sailed.' It had the oddest sound of cheerfulness.

'*I* was dog-tired,' his companion returned, 'when I arrived, and it's this wild hunt for rest that takes all the life out of me. The fact is, Strether—and it's a comfort to have you here at last to say it to; though I don't know, after all, that I've really waited; I've told it to people I've met in the cars —the fact is, such a country as this ain't my *kind* of country anyway. There ain't a country I've seen over here that *does* seem my kind. Oh I don't say but what there are plenty of pretty places and remarkable old things; but the trouble is that I don't seem to feel anywhere in tune. That's one of the reasons why I suppose I've gained so little. I haven't had the first sign of that lift I was led to expect.' With this he broke out more earnestly. 'Look here—I want to go back.'

His eyes were all attached to Strether's now, for he was one of the men who fully face you when they talk of themselves. This enabled his friend to look at him hard and immediately to appear to the highest advantage in his own eyes by doing so. 'That's a genial thing to say to a fellow who has come out on purpose to meet you!'

Nothing could have been finer, on this, than Waymarsh's sombre glow. '*Have* you come out on purpose?'

'Well—very largely.'

'I thought from the way you wrote there was something back of it.'

Strether hesitated. 'Back of my desire to be with you?'

'Back of your prostration.'

Strether, with a smile made more dim by a certain consciousness, shook his head. 'There are all the causes of it!'

'And no particular cause that seemed most to drive you?'

Our friend could at last conscientiously answer. 'Yes. One. There *is* a matter that has had much to do with my coming out.'

Waymarsh waited a little. 'Too private to mention?'

'No, not too private—for *you*. Only rather complicated.'

'Well,' said Waymarsh, who had waited again. 'I *may* lose my mind over here, but I don't know as I've done so yet.'

'Oh you shall have the whole thing. But not to-night.'

Waymarsh seemed to sit stiffer and to hold his elbows tighter. 'Why not—if I can't sleep?'

'Because, my dear man, I *can*!'

'Then where's your prostration?'

'Just in that—that I can put in eight hours.' And Strether brought it out that if Waymarsh didn't 'gain' it was because he didn't go to bed: the result of which was, in its order, that, to do the latter justice, he permitted his friend to insist on his really getting settled. Strether, with a kind coercive hand for it, assisted him to this consummation, and again found his own part in their relation auspiciously enlarged by the smaller touches of lowering the lamp and seeing to a sufficiency of blanket. It somehow ministered for him to indulgence to feel Waymarsh, who looked unnaturally big and black in bed, as much tucked in as a patient in a hospital and, with this covering up to his chin, as much simplified by it. He hovered in vague pity, to be brief, while his companion challenged him out of the bedclothes. 'Is she really after you? Is that what's behind?'

Strether felt an uneasiness at the direction taken by his companion's insight, but he played a little at uncertainty. 'Behind my coming out?'

'Behind your prostration or whatever. It's generally felt, you know, that she follows you up pretty close.'

Strether's candour was never very far off. 'Oh it has occurred to you that I'm literally running away from Mrs Newsome?'

'Well, I haven't *known* but what you are. You're a very attractive man, Strether. You've seen for yourself,' said

Waymarsh, 'what that lady downstairs makes of it. Unless indeed,' he rambled on with an effect between the ironic and the anxious, 'it's you that are after *her*. Is Mrs Newsome *over* here?' He spoke as with a droll dread of her.

It made his friend—though rather dimly—smile. 'Dear no; she's safe, thank goodness—as I think I more and more feel—at home. She thought of coming, but she gave it up. I've come in a manner instead of her; and come to that extent—for you're right in your inference—on her business. So you see there *is* plenty of connexion.'

Waymarsh continued to see at least all there was. 'Involving accordingly the particular one I've referred to?'

Strether took another turn about the room, giving a twitch to his companion's blanket and finally gaining the door. His feeling was that of a nurse who had earned personal rest by having made everything straight. 'Involving more things than I can think of breaking ground on now. But don't be afraid—you shall have them from me: you'll probably find yourself having quite as much of them as you can do with. I shall—if we keep together—very much depend on your impression of some of them.'

Waymarsh's acknowledgment of this tribute was characteristically indirect. 'You mean to say you don't believe we *will* keep together?'

'I only glance at the danger,' Strether paternally said, 'because when I hear you wail to go back I seem to see you open up such possibilities of folly.'

Waymarsh took it—silent a little—like a large snubbed child. 'What are you going to do with me?'

It was the very question Strether himself had put to Miss Gostrey, and he wondered if he had sounded like that. But *he* at least could be more definite. 'I'm going to take you right down to London.'

'Oh I've *been* down to London!' Waymarsh more softly moaned. 'I've no use, Strether, for anything down there.'

'Well,' said Strether good-humouredly, 'I guess you've some use for *me*.'

'So I've got to go?'

'Oh you've got to go further yet.'

'Well,' Waymarsh sighed, 'do your damnedest! Only you *will* tell me before you lead me on all the way——?'

Our friend had again so lost himself, both for amusement and for contrition, in the wonder of whether he had made, in his own challenge that afternoon, such another figure, that he for an instant missed the thread. 'Tell you——?'

'Why what you've got on hand.'

Strether hesitated. 'Why it's such a matter as that even if I positively wanted I shouldn't be able to keep it from you.'

Waymarsh gloomily gazed. 'What does that mean then but that your trip is just *for* her?'

'For Mrs Newsome? Oh it certainly is, as I say. Very much.'

'Then why do you also say it's for me?'

Strether, in impatience, violently played with his latch.

'It's simple enough. It's for both of you.'

Waymarsh at last turned over with a groan. 'Well, *I* won't marry you!'

'Neither, when it comes to that——!' But the visitor had already laughed and escaped.

III

HE HAD told Miss Gostrey that he should probably take, for departure with Waymarsh, some afternoon train, and it thereupon in the morning appeared that this lady had made her own plan for an earlier one. She had breakfasted when Strether came into the coffee-room; but, Waymarsh not having yet emerged, he was in time to recall her to the terms of their understanding and to pronounce her discretion overdone. She was surely not to break away at the very moment she had created a want. He had met her as she rose from her little table in a window, where, with the morning papers beside her, she reminded him, as he let her

know, of Major Pendennis breakfasting at his club—a compliment of which she professed a deep appreciation; and he detained her as pleadingly as if he had already—and notably under pressure of the visions of the night—learned to be unable to do without her. She must teach him at all events, before she went, to order breakfast as breakfast was ordered in Europe, and she must especially sustain him in the problem of ordering for Waymarsh. The latter had laid upon his friend, by desperate sounds through the door of his room, dreadful divined responsibilities in respect to beefsteak and oranges—responsibilities which Miss Gostrey took over with an alertness of action that matched her quick intelligence. She had before this weaned the expatriated from traditions compared with which the matutinal beefsteak was but the creature of an hour, and it was not for her, with some of her memories, to falter in the path; though she freely enough declared, on reflexion, that there was always in such cases a choice of opposed policies. 'There are times when to give them their head, you know——!'

They had gone to wait together in the garden for the dressing of the meal, and Strether found her more suggestive than ever. 'Well, what?'

'Is to bring about for them such a complexity of relations —unless indeed we call it a simplicity!—that the situation *has* to wind itself up. They want to go back.'

'And you want them to go!' Strether gaily concluded.

'I always want them to go, and I send them as fast as I can.'

'Oh I know—you take them to Liverpool.'

'Any port will serve in a storm. I'm—with all my other functions—an agent for repatriation. I want to re-people our stricken country. What will become of it else? I want to discourage others.'

The ordered English garden, in the freshness of the day, was delightful to Strether, who liked the sound, under his feet, of the tight fine gravel, packed with the chronic damp,

and who had the idlest eye for the deep smoothness of turf and the clean curves of paths. 'Other people?'

'Other countries. Other people—yes. I want to encourage our own.'

Strether wondered. 'Not to come? Why then do you "meet" them?—since it doesn't appear to be to stop them?'

'Oh that they shouldn't come is as yet too much to ask. What I attend to is that they come quickly and return still more so. I meet them to help it to be over as soon as possible, and though I don't stop them I've my way of putting them through. That's my little system; and, if you want to know,' said Maria Gostrey, 'it's my real secret, my innermost mission and use. I only seem, you see, to beguile and approve; but I've thought it all out and I'm working all the while underground. I can't perhaps quite give you my formula, but I think that practically I succeed. I send you back spent. So you stay back. Passed through my hands——'

'We don't turn up again?' The further she went the further he always saw himself able to follow. 'I don't want your formula—I feel quite enough, as I hinted yesterday, your abysses. Spent!' he echoed. 'If that's how you're arranging so subtly to send me I thank you for the warning.'

For a minute, amid the pleasantness—poetry in tariffed items, but all the more, for guests already convicted, a challenge to consumption—they smiled at each other in confirmed fellowship. 'Do you call it subtly? It's a plain poor tale. Besides, you're a special case.'

'Oh special cases—that's weak!' She was weak enough, further still, to defer her journey and agree to accompany the gentlemen on their own, might a separate carriage mark her independence; though it was in spite of this to befall after luncheon that she went off alone and that, with a tryst taken for a day of her company in London, they lingered another night. She had, during the morning—spent in a way that he was to remember later on as the very climax of his foretaste, as warm with presentiments, with what he would have called collapses—had all sorts of things out with Strether; and among them the fact that though there was

never a moment of her life when she wasn't 'due' somewhere, there was yet scarce a perfidy to others of which she wasn't capable for his sake. She explained moreover that wherever she happened to be she found a dropped thread to pick up, a ragged edge to repair, some familiar appetite in ambush, jumping out as she approached, yet appeasable with a temporary biscuit. It became, on her taking the risk of the deviation imposed on him by her insidious arrangement of his morning meal, a point of honour for her not to fail with Waymarsh of the larger success too; and her subsequent boast to Strether was that she had made their friend fare —and quite without his knowing what was the matter—as Major Pendennis would have fared at the Megatherium. She had made him breakfast like a gentleman, and it was nothing, she forcibly asserted, to what she would yet make him do. She made him participate in the slow reiterated ramble with which, for Strether, the new day amply filled itself; and it was by her art that he somehow had the air, on the ramparts and in the Rows, of carrying a point of his own.

The three strolled and stared and gossiped, or at least the two did; the case really yielding for their comrade, if analysed, but the element of stricken silence. This element indeed affected Strether as charged with audible rumblings, but he was conscious of the care of taking it explicitly as a sign of pleasant peace. He wouldn't appeal too much, for that provoked stiffness; yet he wouldn't be too freely tacit, for that suggested giving up. Waymarsh himself adhered to an ambiguous dumbness that might have represented either the growth of a perception or the despair of one; and at times and in places—where the low-browed galleries were darkest, the opposite gables queerest, the solicitations of every kind densest—the others caught him fixing hard some object of minor interest, fixing even at moments nothing discernible, as if he were indulging it with a truce. When he met Strether's eye on such occasions he looked guilty and furtive, fell the next minute into some attitude of retraction. Our friend couldn't show him the

right things for fear of provoking some total renouncement, and was tempted even to show him the wrong in order to make him differ with triumph. There were moments when he himself felt shy of professing the full sweetness of the taste of leisure, and there were others when he found himself feeling as if his passages of interchange with the lady at his side might fall upon the third member of their party very much as Mr Burchell, at Dr Primrose's fireside, was influenced by the high flights of the visitors from London. The smallest things so arrested and amused him that he repeatedly almost apologised—brought up afresh in explanation his plea of a previous grind. He was aware at the same time that his grind had been as nothing to Waymarsh's, and he repeatedly confessed that, to cover his frivolity, he was doing his best for his previous virtue. Do what he might, in any case, his previous virtue was still there, and it seemed fairly to stare at him out of the windows of shops that were not as the shops of Woollett, fairly to make him want things that he shouldn't know what to do with. It was by the oddest, the least admissible of laws demoralising him now; and the way it boldly took was to make him want more wants. These first walks in Europe were in fact a kind of finely lurid intimation of what one might find at the end of that process. Had he come back after long years, in something already so like the evening of life, only to be exposed to it? It was at all events over the shop-windows that he made, with Waymarsh, most free; though it would have been easier had not the latter most sensibly yielded to the appeal of the merely useful trades. He pierced with his sombre detachment the plate-glass of ironmongers and saddlers, while Strether flaunted an affinity with the dealers in stamped letter-paper and in smart neckties. Strether was in fact recurrently shameless in the presence of the tailors, though it was just over the heads of the tailors that his countryman most loftily looked. This gave Miss Gostrey a grasped opportunity to back up Waymarsh at his expense. The weary lawyer—it was unmistakable—had a conception of dress; but that, in view of some of the features of the effect produced, was

just what made the danger of insistence on it. Strether wondered if he by this time thought Miss Gostrey less fashionable or Lambert Strether more so; and it appeared probable that most of the remarks exchanged between this latter pair about passers, figures, faces, personal types, exemplified in their degree the disposition to talk as 'society' talked.

Was what was happening to himself then, was what already *had* happened, really that a woman of fashion was floating him into society and that an old friend deserted on the brink was watching the force of the current? When the woman of fashion permitted Strether—as she permitted him at the most—the purchase of a pair of gloves, the terms she made about it, the prohibition of neckties and other items till she should be able to guide him through the Burlington Arcade, were such as to fall upon a sensitive ear as a challenge to unjust imputations. Miss Gostrey was such a woman of fashion as could make without a symptom of vulgar blinking an appointment for the Burlington Arcade. Mere discriminations about a pair of gloves could thus at any rate represent—always for such sensitive ears as were in question—possibilities of something that Strether could make a mark against only as the peril of apparent wantonness. He had quite the consciousness of his new friend, for their companion, that he might have had of a Jesuit in petticoats, a representative of the recruiting interests of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church for Waymarsh—that was to say the enemy, the monster of bulging eyes and far-reaching quivering groping tentacles—was exactly society, exactly the multiplication of shibboleths, exactly the discrimination of types and tones, exactly the wicked old Rows of Chester, rank with feudalism; exactly in short Europe.

There was light for observation, however, in an incident that occurred just before they turned back to luncheon. Waymarsh had been for a quarter of an hour exceptionally mute and distant, and something, or other—Strether was never to make out exactly what—proved, as it were, too

much for him after his comrades had stood for three minutes taking in, while they leaned on an old balustrade that guarded the edge of the Row, a particularly crooked and huddled street-view. 'He thinks us sophisticated, he thinks us worldly, he thinks us wicked, he thinks us all sorts of queer things,' Strether reflected; for wondrous were the vague quantities our friend had within a couple of short days acquired the habit of conveniently and conclusively lumping together. There seemed moreover a direct connexion between some such inference and a sudden grim dash taken by Waymarsh to the opposite side. This movement was startlingly sudden, and his companions at first supposed him to have espied, to be pursuing, the glimpse of an acquaintance. They next made out, however, that an open door had instantly received him, and they then recognised him as engulfed in the establishment of a jeweller, behind whose glittering front he was lost to view. The act had somehow the note of a demonstration, and it left each of the others to show a face almost of fear. But Miss Gostrey broke into a laugh. 'What's the matter with him?'

'Well,' said Strether, 'he can't stand it.'

'But can't stand what?'

'Anything. Europe.'

'Then how will that jeweller help him?'

Strether seemed to make it out, from their position, between the interstices of arrayed watches, of close-hung dangling gewgaws. 'You'll see.'

'Ah that's just what—if he buys anything—I'm afraid of: that I shall see something rather dreadful.'

Strether studied the finer appearances. 'He may buy everything.'

'Then don't you think we ought to follow him?'

'Not for worlds. Besides we can't. We're paralysed. We exchange a long scared look, we publicly tremble. The thing is, you see, we "realise". He has struck for freedom.'

She wondered but she laughed. 'Ah what a price to pay! And I was preparing some for him so cheap.'

'No, no,' Strether went on, frankly amused now; 'don't

call it that: the kind of freedom *you* deal in is dear.' Then as to justify himself: 'Am I not in *my* way trying it? It's this.'

'Being here, you mean, with me?'

'Yes, and talking to you as I do. I've known you a few hours and I've known *him* all my life; so that if the ease I thus take with you about him isn't magnificent'—and the thought of it held him a moment—'why, it's rather base.'

'It's magnificent!' said Miss Gostrey to make an end of it. 'And you should hear,' she added, 'the ease *I* take—and I above all intend to take—with Mr Waymarsh.'

Strether thought. 'About *me?* Ah that's no equivalent. The equivalent would be Waymarsh's himself serving me up —his remorseless analysis of me. And he'll never do that'—he was sadly clear. 'He'll never remorselessly analyse me.' He quite held her with the authority of this. 'He'll never say a word to you about me.'

She took it in; she did it justice; yet after an instant her reason, her restless irony, disposed of it. 'Of course he won't. For what do you take people, that they're able to say words about anything, able remorselessly to analyse? There are not many like you and me. It will be only because he's too stupid.'

It stirred in her friend a sceptical echo which was at the same time the protest of the faith of years. 'Waymarsh stupid?'

'Compared with you.'

Strether had still his eyes on the jeweller's front, and he waited a moment to answer. 'He's a success of a kind that I haven't approached.'

'Do you mean he has made money?'

'He makes it—to my belief. And I,' said Strether, 'though with a back quite as bent, have never made anything. I'm a perfectly equipped failure.'

He feared an instant she'd ask him if he meant he was poor; and he was glad she didn't, for he really didn't know to what the truth on this unpleasant point mightn't have prompted her. She only, however, confirmed his assertion.

'Thank goodness you're a failure—it's why I so distinguish you! Anything else to-day is too hideous. Look about you—look at the successes. Would you *be* one, on your honour? Look, moreover,' she continued, 'at me.'

For a little accordingly their eyes met. 'I see,' Strether returned. 'You too are out of it.'

'The superiority you discern in me,' she concurred, 'announces my futility. If you knew,' she sighed, 'the dreams of my youth! But our realities are what has brought us together. We're beaten brothers in arms.'

He smiled at her kindly enough, but he shook his head. 'It doesn't alter the fact that you're expensive. You've cost me already——!'

But he had hung fire. 'Cost you what?'

'Well, my past—in one great lump. But no matter,' he laughed; 'I'll pay with my last penny.'

Her attention had unfortunately now been engaged by their comrade's return, for Waymarsh met their view as he came out of his shop. 'I hope he hasn't paid,' she said, 'with *his* last; though I'm convinced he has been splendid, and has been so for you.'

'Ah no—not that!'

'Then for me?'

'Quite as little.' Waymarsh was by this time near enough to show signs his friends could read, though he seemed to look almost carefully at nothing in particular.

'Then for himself?'

'For nobody. For nothing. For freedom.'

'But what has freedom to do with it?'

Strether's answer was indirect. 'To be as good as you and me. But different.'

She had had time to take in their companion's face; and with it, as such things were easy for her, she took in all. 'Different—yes. But better!'

If Waymarsh was sombre he was also indeed most sublime. He told them nothing, left his absence unexplained, and though they were convinced he had made some extraordinary purchase they were never to learn its nature. He

only glowered grandly at the tops of the old gables. 'It's the sacred rage,' Strether had had further time to say; and this sacred rage was to become between them, for convenient comprehension, the description of one of his periodical necessities. It was Strether who eventually contended that it did make him better than they. But by that time Miss Gostrey was convinced that she didn't want to be better than Strether.

BOOK SECOND

I

THOSE OCCASIONS on which Strether was, in association with the exile from Milrose, to see the sacred rage glimmer through would doubtless have their due periodicity; but our friend had meanwhile to find names for many other matters. On no evening of his life perhaps, as he reflected, had he had to supply so many as on the third of his short stay in London; an evening spent by Miss Gostrey's side at one of the theatres, to which he had found himself transported, without his own hand raised, on the mere expression of a conscientious wonder. She knew her theatre, she knew her play, as she had triumphantly known, three days running, everything else, and the moment filled to the brim, for her companion, that apprehension of the interesting which, whether or no the interesting happened to filter through his guide, strained now to its limits his brief opportunity. Waymarsh hadn't come with them; he had seen plays enough, he signified, before Strether had joined him—an affirmation that had its full force when his friend ascertained by questions that he had seen two and a circus. Questions as to what he had seen had on him indeed an effect only less favourable than questions as to what he hadn't. He liked the former to be discriminated; but how could it be done, Strether asked of their constant counsellor, without discriminating the latter?

Miss Gostrey had dined with him at his hotel, face to face over a small table on which the lighted candles had rose-coloured shades; and the rose-coloured shades and the small table and the soft fragrance of the lady—had anything to his mere sense ever been so soft?—were so many touches in he scarce knew what positive high picture. He had been

to the theatre, even to the opera, in Boston, with Mrs Newsome, more than once acting as her only escort; but there had been no little confronted dinner, no pink lights, no whiff of vague sweetness, as a preliminary: one of the results of which was that at present, mildly rueful, though with a sharpish accent, he actually asked himself *why* there hadn't. There was much the same difference in his impression of the noticed state of his companion, whose dress was 'cut-down', as he believed the term to be, in respect to shoulders and bosom, in a manner quite other than Mrs Newsome's, and who wore round her throat a broad red velvet band with an antique jewel—he was rather complacently sure it was antique—attached to it in front. Mrs Newsome's dress was never in any degree 'cut down', and she never wore round her throat a broad red velvet band: if she had, moreover, would it ever have served so to carry on and complicate, as he now almost felt, his vision?

It would have been absurd of him to trace into ramifications the effect of the ribbon from which Miss Gostrey's trinket depended, had he not for the hour, at the best, been so given over to uncontrolled perceptions. What was it but an uncontrolled perception that his friend's velvet band somehow added, in her appearance, to the value of every other item—to that of her smile and of the way she carried her head, to that of her complexion, of her lips, her teeth, her eyes, her hair? What, certainly, had a man conscious of a man's work in the world to do with red velvet bands? He wouldn't for anything have so exposed himself as to tell Miss Gostrey how much he liked hers, yet he *had* none the less not only caught himself in the act—frivolous, no doubt, idiotic, and above all unexpected—of liking it: he had in addition taken it as a starting-point for fresh backward, fresh forward, fresh lateral flights. The manner in which Mrs Newsome's throat *was* encircled suddenly represented for him, in an alien order, almost as many things as the manner in which Miss Gostrey's was. Mrs Newsome wore, at operatic hours, a black silk dress—very handsome, he knew it was 'handsome'—and an ornament that his memory was

able further to identify as a ruche. He had his association indeed with the ruche, but it was rather imperfectly romantic. He had once said to the wearer—and it was as 'free' a remark as he had ever made to her—that she looked, with her ruff and other matters, like Queen Elizabeth; and it had after this in truth been his fancy that, as a consequence of that tenderness and an acceptance of the idea, the form of this special tribute to the 'frill' had grown slightly more marked. The connexion, as he sat there and let his imagination roam, was to strike him as vaguely pathetic; but there it all was, and pathetic was doubtless in the conditions the best thing it could possibly be. It had assuredly existed at any rate; for it seemed now to come over him that no gentleman of his age at Woollett could ever, to a lady of Mrs Newsome's, which was not much less than his, have embarked on such a simile.

All sorts of things in fact now seemed to come over him, comparatively few of which his chronicler can hope for space to mention. It came over him for instance that Miss Gostrey looked perhaps like Mary Stuart: Lambert Strether had a candour of fancy which could rest for an instant gratified in such an antithesis. It came over him that never before —no, literally never—had a lady dined with him at a public place before going to the play. The publicity of the place was just, in the matter, for Strether, the rare strange thing; it affected him almost as the achievement of privacy might have affected a man of a different experience. He had married, in the far-away years, so young as to have missed the natural time in Boston for taking girls to the Museum; and it was absolutely true of him that—even after the close of the period of conscious detachment occupying the centre of his life, the grey middle desert of the two deaths, that of his wife and that, ten years later, of his boy—he had never taken any one anywhere. It came over him in especial—though the monition had, as happened, already sounded, fitfully gleamed, in other forms—that the business he had come out on hadn't yet been so brought home to him as by the sight of the people about him. She gave him the impression,

his friend, at first, more straight than he got it for himself—gave it simply by saying with off-hand illumination, 'Oh yes, they're types!'—but after he had taken it he made to the full his own use of it; both while he kept silence for the four acts and while he talked in the intervals. It was an evening, it was a world of types, and this was a connexion above all in which the figures and faces in the stalls were interchangeable with those on the stage.

He felt as if the play itself penetrated him with the naked elbow of his neighbour, a great stripped handsome red-haired lady who conversed with a gentleman on her other side in stray dissyllables which had for his ear, in the oddest way in the world, so much sound that he wondered they hadn't more sense; and he recognised by the same law, beyond the footlights, what he was pleased to take for the very flush of English life. He had distracted drops in which he couldn't have said if it were actors or auditors who were most true, and the upshot of which, each time, was the consciousness of new contracts. However he viewed his job it was 'types' he should have to tackle. Those before him and around him were not as the types of Woollett, where, for that matter, it had begun to seem to him that there must only have been the male and the female. These made two exactly, even with the individual varieties. Here, on the other hand, apart from the personal and the sexual range—which might be greater or less—a series of strong stamps had been applied, as it were, from without; stamps that his observation played with as, before a glass case on a table, it might have passed from medal to medal and from copper to gold. It befell that in the drama precisely there was a bad woman in a yellow frock who made a pleasant weak good-looking young man in perpetual evening dress do the most dreadful things. Strether felt himself on the whole not afraid of the yellow frock, but he was vaguely anxious over a certain kindness into which he found himself drifting for its victim. He hadn't come out, he reminded himself, to be too kind, or indeed to be kind at all, to Chadwick Newsome. Would Chad also be in perpetual evening dress? He some-

how rather hoped it—it seemed so to add to *this* young man's general amenability; though he wondered too if, to fight him with his own weapons, he himself (a thought almost startling) would have likewise to be. This young man furthermore would have been much more easy to handle—at least for *him*—than appeared probable in respect to Chad.

It came up for him with Miss Gostrey that there were things of which she would really perhaps after all have heard; and she admitted when a little pressed that she was never quite sure of what she heard as distinguished from things such as, on occasions like the present, she only extravagantly guessed. 'I seem with this freedom, you see, to have guessed Mr Chad. He's a young man on whose head high hopes are placed at Woollett; a young man a wicked woman has got hold of and whom his family over there have sent you out to rescue. You've accepted the mission of separating him from the wicked woman. Are you quite sure she's very bad for him?'

Something in his manner showed it as quite pulling him up. 'Of course we are. Wouldn't *you* be?'

'Oh I don't know. One never does—does one?—beforehand. One can only judge on the facts. Yours are quite new to me; I'm really not in the least, as you see, in possession of them: so it will be awfully interesting to have them from you. If you're satisfied, that's all that's required. I mean if you're sure you *are* sure: sure it won't do.'

'That he should lead such a life? Rather!'

'Oh but I don't know, you see, about his life; you've not told me about his life. She may be charming—his life!'

'Charming?'—Strether stared before him. 'She's base, venal—out of the streets.'

'I see. And *he*——?'

'Chad, wretched boy?'

'Of what type and temper is he?' she went on as Strether had lapsed.

'Well—the obstinate.' It was as if for a moment he had been going to say more and had then controlled himself.

That was scarce what she wished. 'Do you like him?'

This time he was prompt. 'No. How *can* I?'

'Do you mean because of your being so saddled with him?'

'I'm thinking of his mother,' said Strether after a moment. 'He has darkened her admirable life.' He spoke with austerity. 'He has worried her half to death.'

'Oh that's of course odious.' She had a pause as if for renewed emphasis of this truth, but it ended on another note. 'Is her life very admirable?'

'Extraordinarily.'

There was so much in the tone that Miss Gostrey had to devote another pause to the appreciation of it. 'And has he only *her*? I don't mean the bad woman in Paris,' she quickly added—'for I assure you I shouldn't even at the best be disposed to allow him more than one. But has he only his mother?'

'He has also a sister, older than himself and married; and they're both remarkably fine women.'

'Very handsome, you mean?'

This promptitude—almost, as he might have thought, this precipitation, gave him a brief drop; but he came up again. 'Mrs Newsome, I think, is handsome, though she's not of course, with a son of twenty-eight and a daughter of thirty, in her very first youth. She married, however, extremely young.'

'And is wonderful,' Miss Gostrey asked, 'for her age?'

Strether seemed to feel with a certain disquiet the pressure of it. 'I don't say she's wonderful. Or rather,' he went on to the next moment, 'I do say it. It's exactly what she *is* —wonderful. But I wasn't thinking of her appearance,' he explained—'striking as that doubtless is. I was thinking—well, of many other things.' He seemed to look at these as if to mention some of them; then took, pulling himself up, another turn. 'About Mrs Pocock people may differ.'

'Is that the daughter's name—"Pocock"?'

'That's the daughter's name,' Strether sturdily confessed.

'And people may differ, you mean, about *her* beauty?'

'About everything.'

'But *you* admire her?'

He gave his friend a glance as to show how he could bear this. 'I'm perhaps a little afraid of her.'

'Oh,' said Miss Gostrey, 'I see her from here! You may say then I see her very fast and very far, but I've already shown you I do. The young man and the two ladies,' she went on, 'are at any rate all the family?'

'Quite all. His father has been dead ten years, and there's no brother, nor any other sister. They'd do,' said Strether, 'anything in the world for him.'

'And you'd do anything in the world for *them*?'

He shifted again; she had made it perhaps just a shade too affirmative for his nerves. 'Oh I don't know!'

'You'd do at any rate this, and the "anything" they'd do is represented by their *making* you do it.'

'Ah they couldn't have come—either of them. They're very busy people and Mrs Newsome in particular has a large full life. She's moreover highly nervous—and not at all strong.'

'You mean she's an American invalid?'

He carefully distinguished. 'There's nothing she likes less than to be called one, but she would consent to be one of those things, I think,' he laughed, 'if it were the only way to be the other.'

'Consent to be an American in order to be an invalid?'

'No,' said Strether, 'the other way round. She's at any rate delicate sensitive high-strung. She puts so much of herself into everything——'

Ah Maria knew these things! 'That she has nothing left for anything else? Of course she hasn't. To whom do you say it? High-strung? Don't I spend my life, for them, jamming down the pedal? I see moreover how it has told on you.'

Strether took this more lightly. 'Oh I jam down the pedal too!'

'Well,' she lucidly returned, 'we must from this moment

bear on it together with all our might.' And she forged ahead. 'Have they money?'

But it was as if, while her energetic image still held him, her enquiry fell short. 'Mrs Newsome,' he wished further to explain, 'hasn't moreover your courage on the question of contact. If she had come it would have been to see the person herself.'

'The woman? Ah but that's courage.'

'No—it's exaltation, which is a very different thing. Courage,' he, however, accommodatingly threw out, 'is what *you* have.'

She shook her head. 'You say that only to patch me up—to cover the nudity of my want of exaltation. I've neither the one nor the other. I've mere battered indifference. I see that what you mean,' Miss Gostrey pursued, 'is that if your friend *had* come she would take great views, and the great views, to put it simply, would be too much for her.'

Strether looked amused at her notion of the simple, but he adopted her formula. 'Everything's too much for her.'

'Ah then such a service as this of yours——'

'Is more for her than anything else? Yes—far more. But so long as it isn't too much for *me*——!'

'Her condition doesn't matter? Surely not; we leave her condition out; we take it, that is, for granted. I see it, her condition, as behind and beneath you; yet at the same time I see it as bearing you up.'

'Oh it does bear me up!' Strether laughed.

'Well then as yours bears *me* nothing more's needed.' With which she put again her question. 'Has Mrs Newsome money?'

This time he heeded. 'Oh plenty. That's the root of the evil. There's money, to very large amounts, in the concern. Chad has had the free use of a great deal. But if he'll pull himself together and come home, all the same, he'll find his account in it.'

She had listened with all her interest. 'And I hope to goodness you'll find yours!'

'He'll take up his definite material reward,' said Strether

without acknowledgment of this. 'He's at the parting of the ways. He can come into the business now—he can't come later.'

'Is there a business?'

'Lord, yes—a big brave bouncing business. A roaring trade.'

'A great shop?'

'Yes—a workshop; a great production, a great industry. The concern's a manufacture—and a manufacture that, if it's only properly looked after, may well be on the way to become a monopoly. It's a little thing they make—make better, it appears, than other people can, or than other people, at any rate, do. Mr Newsome, being a man of ideas, at least in that particular line,' Strether explained, 'put them on it with great effect, and gave the place altogether, in his time, an immense lift.'

'It's a place in itself?'

'Well, quite a number of buildings; almost a little industrial colony. But above all it's a thing. The article produced.'

'And what *is* the article produced.'

Strether looked about him as in slight reluctance to say; then the curtain, which he saw about to rise, came to his aid. 'I'll tell you next time.' But when the next time came he only said he'd tell her later on—after they should have left the theatre; for she had immediately reverted to their topic, and even for himself the picture of the stage was now overlaid with another image. His postponements, however, made her wonder—wonder if the article referred to were anything bad. And she explained that she meant improper or ridiculous or wrong. But Strether, so far as that went, could satisfy her. 'Unmentionable? Oh no, we constantly talk of it; we are quite familiar and brazen about it. Only, as a small, trivial, rather ridiculous object of the commonest domestic use, it's just wanting in—what shall I say? Well, dignity, or the least approach to distinction. Right here, therefore, with everything about us so grand——!' In short he shrank.

'It's a false note?'

'Sadly. It's vulgar.'

'But surely not vulgarer than this.' Then on his wondering as she herself had done: 'Than everything about us.' She seemed a trifle irritated. 'What do you take this for?'

'Why for—comparatively—divine!'

'This dreadful London theatre? It's impossible, if you really want to know.'

'Oh then,' laughed Strether, 'I don't really want to know!'

It made between them a pause, which she, however, still fascinated by the mystery of the production at Woollett, presently broke. ' "Rather ridiculous"? Clothes-pins? Saleratus? Shoe-polish?'

It brought him round. 'No—you don't even "burn". I don't think, you know, you'll guess it.'

'How then can I judge how vulgar it is?'

'You'll judge when I do tell you'—and he persuaded her to patience. But it may even now frankly be mentioned that he in the sequel never *was* to tell her. He actually never did so, and it moreover oddly occurred that by the law, within her, of the incalculable, her desire for the information dropped and her attitude to the question converted itself into a positive cultivation of ignorance. In ignorance she could humour her fancy, and that proved a useful freedom. She could treat the little nameless object as indeed unnamable—she could make their abstention enormously definite. There might indeed have been for Strether the portent of this in what she next said.

'Is it perhaps then because it's so bad—because your industry, as you call it, *is* so vulgar—that Mr Chad won't come back? Does he feel the taint? Is he staying away not to be mixed up in it?'

'Oh,' Strether laughed, 'it wouldn't appear—would it?—that he feels "taints"! He's glad enough of the money from it, and the money's his whole basis. There's appreciation in that—I mean as to the allowance his mother has hitherto made him. She has of course the resource of cutting this allowance off; but even then he has unfortunately, and on

no small scale, his independent supply—money left him by his grandfather, her own father.'

'Wouldn't the fact you mention then,' Miss Gostrey asked, 'make it just more easy for him to be particular? Isn't he conceivable as fastidious about the source—the apparent and public source—of his income?'

Strether was able quite good-humouredly to entertain the proposition. 'The source of his grandfather's wealth—and thereby of his own share in it—was not particularly noble.'

'And what source was it?'

Strether cast about. 'Well—practices.'

'In business? Infamies? He was an old swindler?'

'Oh,' he said with more emphasis than spirit, 'I shan't describe *him* nor narrate his exploits.'

'Lord, what abysses! And the late Mr Newsome then?'

'Well, what about him?'

'Was he like the grandfather?'

'No—he was on the other side of the house. And he was different.'

Miss Gostrey kept it up. 'Better?'

Her friend for a moment hung fire. 'No.'

Her comment on his hesitation was scarce the less marked for being mute. 'Thank you. *Now* don't you see,' she went on, 'why the boy doesn't come home? He's drowning his shame.'

'His shame? What shame?'

'What shame? *Comment donc? The* shame.'

'But where and when,' Strether asked, 'is "*the* shame"—where is any shame—to-day? The men I speak of—they did as every one does; and (besides being ancient history) it was all a matter of appreciation.'

She showed how she understood. 'Mrs Newsome has appreciated?'

'Ah I can't speak for *her*!'

'In the midst of such doings—and as I understand you, profiting by them, she at least has remained exquisite?'

'Oh I can't talk of her!' Strether said.

'I thought she was just what you *could* talk of. You *don't* trust me,' Miss Gostrey after a moment declared.

It had its effect. 'Well, her money is spent, her life conceived and carried on with a large beneficence——'

'That's a kind of expiation of wrongs? Gracious,' she added before he could speak, 'how intensely you make me see her!'

'If you see her,' Strether dropped, 'it's all that's necessary.'

She really seemed to have her. 'I feel that. She *is*, in spite of everything, handsome.'

This at least enlivened him. 'What do you mean by everything?'

'Well, I mean *you*.' With which she had one of her swift changes of ground. 'You say the concern needs looking after; but doesn't Mrs Newsome look after it?'

'So far as possible. She's wonderfully able, but it's not her affair, and her life's a good deal overcharged. She has many, many things.'

'And you also?'

'Oh yes—I've many too, if you will.'

'I see. But what I mean is,' Miss Gostrey amended, 'do you also look after the business?'

'Oh no, I don't touch the business.'

'Only everything else?'

'Well, yes—some things.'

'As for instance——?'

Strether obligingly thought. 'Well, the Review.'

'The Review?—you have a Review?'

'Certainly, Woollett has a Review—which Mrs Newsome, for the most part, magnificently pays for and which I, not at all magnificently, edit. My name's on the cover,' Strether pursued, 'and I'm really rather disappointed and hurt that you seem never to have heard of it.'

She neglected for a moment this grievance. 'And what kind of a Review is it?'

His serenity was not completely restored. 'Well, it's green.'

'Do you mean in political colour as they say here—in thought?'

'No; I mean the cover's green—of the most lovely shade.'

'And with Mrs Newsome's name on it too?'

He waited a little. 'Oh as for that you must judge if she peeps out. She's behind the whole thing; but she's of a delicacy and discretion——!'

Miss Gostrey took it all. 'I'm sure. She *would* be. I don't underrate her. She must be rather a swell.'

'Oh yes, she's rather a swell!'

'A Woollett swell—*bon!* I like the idea of a Woollett swell. And you must be rather one too, to be so mixed up with her.'

'Ah no,' said Strether, 'that's not the way it works.'

But she had already taken him up. 'The way it works—you needn't tell me!—is of course that you efface yourself.'

'With my name on the cover?' he lucidly objected.

'Ah but you don't put it on for yourself.'

'I beg your pardon—that's exactly what I do put it on for. It's exactly the thing that I'm reduced to doing for myself. It seems to rescue a little, you see, from the wreck of hopes and ambitions, the refuse heap of disappointments and failures, my one presentable little scrap of an identity.'

On this she looked at him as to say many things, but what she at last simply said was: 'She likes to see it there. You're the bigger swell of the two,' she immediately continued, 'because you think you're not one. She thinks she *is* one. However,' Miss Gostrey added, 'she thinks you're one too. You're at all events the biggest she can get hold of.' She embroidered, she abounded. 'I don't say it to interfere between you, but on the day she gets hold of a bigger one——!' Strether had thrown back his head as in silent mirth over something that struck him in her audacity or felicity, and her flight meanwhile was already higher. 'Therefore close with her——!'

'Close with her?' he asked, as she seemed to hang poised.

'Before you lose your chance.'

Their eyes met over it. 'What do you mean by closing?'

'And what do I mean by your chance? I'll tell when you tell me all the things *you* don't. Is it her *greatest* fad?' she briskly pursued.

'The Review?' He seemed to wonder how he could best describe it. This resulted however but in a sketch. 'It's her tribute to the ideal.'

'I see. You go in for tremendous things.'

'We go in for the unpopular side—that is so far as we dare.'

'And how far *do* you dare?'

'Well, she very far. I much less. I don't begin to have her faith. She provides,' said Strether, 'three-fourths of that. And she provides, as I've confided to you, *all* the money.'

It evoked somehow a vision of gold that held for a little Miss Gostrey's eyes, and she looked as if she heard the bright dollars shovelled in. 'I hope then you make a good thing——'

'I *never* make a good thing!' he at once returned.

She just waited. 'Don't you call it a good thing to be loved?'

'Oh we're not loved. We're not even hated. We're only just sweetly ignored.'

She had another pause. 'You don't trust me!' she once more repeated.

'Don't I when I lift the last veil?—tell you the very secret of the prison-house?'

Again she met his eyes, but to the result that after an instant her own turned away with impatience. 'You don't sell? Oh, I'm glad of *that!*' After which however, and before he could protest, she was off again. 'She's just a *moral* swell.'

He accepted gaily enough the definition. 'Yes—I really think that describes her.'

But it had for his friend the oddest connexion. 'How does she do her hair?'

He laughed out. 'Beautifully!'

'Ah that doesn't tell me. However, it doesn't matter—I know. It's tremendously neat—a real reproach; quite re-

markably thick and without, as yet, a single strand of white. There!'

He blushed for her realism, but he gaped at her truth. 'You're the very deuce.'

'What else *should* I be? It was as the very deuce I pounced upon you. But don't let it trouble you, for everything but the very deuce—at our age—is a bore and a delusion, and even he himself, after all, but half a joy.' With which, on a single sweep of her wing, she resumed. 'You assist her to expiate—which is rather hard when you've yourself not sinned.'

'It's she who hasn't sinned,' Strether replied. 'I've sinned the most.'

'Ah,' Miss Gostrey cynically laughed, 'what a picture of *her*! Have you robbed the widow and the orphan?'

'I've sinned enough,' said Strether.

'Enough for whom? Enough for what?'

'Well, to be where I am.'

'Thank you!' They were disturbed at this moment by the passage between their knees and the back of the seats before them of a gentleman who had been absent during a part of the performance and who now returned for the close; but the interruption left Miss Gostrey time, before the subsequent hush, to express as a sharp finality her sense of the moral of all their talk. 'I knew you had something up your sleeve!' This finality, however, left them in its turn, at the end of the play, as disposed to hang back as if they had still much to say; so that they easily agreed to let every one go before them—they found an interest in waiting. They made out from the lobby that the night had turned to rain; yet Miss Gostrey let her friend know that he wasn't to see her home. He was simply to put her, by herself, into a four-wheeler; she liked so in London, of wet nights after wild pleasures, thinking things over, on the return, in lonely four-wheelers. This was her great time, she intimated, for pulling herself together. The delays caused by the weather, the struggle for vehicles at the door, gave them occasion to subside on a divan at the back of the vestibule and just

beyond the reach of the fresh damp gusts from the street. Here Strether's comrade resumed that free handling of the subject to which his own imagination of it already owed so much. 'Does your young friend in Paris like you?'

It had almost, after the interval, startled him. 'Oh, I hope not! Why *should* he?'

'Why shouldn't he?' Miss Gostrey asked. 'That you're coming down on him need have nothing to do with it.'

'You see more in it,' he presently returned, 'than I.'

'Of course I see *you* in it.'

'Well then you see more in "me".'

'Than you see yourself ?Very likely. That's always one's right. What I was thinking of,' she explained, 'is the possible particular effect on him of his *milieu*.'

'Oh his *milieu*——!' Strether really felt that he could imagine it better now than three hours before.

'Do you mean it can only have been so lowering?'

'Why that's my very starting-point.'

'Yes, but you start so far back. What do his letters say?'

'Nothing. He practically ignores us—or spares us. He doesn't write.'

'I see. But there are all the same,' she went on, 'two quite distinct things that—given the wonderful place he's in—may have happened to him. One is that he may have got brutalised. The other is that he may have got refined.'

Strether stared—this *was* a novelty. 'Refined?'

'Oh,' she said quietly, 'there are refinements.'

The way of it made him, after looking at her, break into a laugh. '*You* have them!'

'As one of the signs,' she continued in the same tone, 'they constitute perhaps the worst.'

He thought it over and his gravity returned. 'Is it refinement not to answer his mother's letters?'

She appeared to have a scruple, but she brought it out. 'Oh I should say the greatest of all.'

'Well,' said Strether, 'I'm quite content to let it, as one of the signs, pass for the worst that I know he believes he can do what he likes with me.'

This appeared to strike her. 'How do you know it?'

'Oh I'm sure of it. I feel it in my bones.'

'Feel he *can* do it?'

'Feel that he believes he can. It may come to the same thing!' Strether laughed.

She wouldn't, however, have this. 'Nothing for you will ever come to the same thing as anything else.' And she understood what she meant, it seemed, sufficiently to go straight on. 'You say that if he does break he'll come in for things at home?'

'Quite positively. He'll come in for a particular chance—a chance that any properly constituted young man would jump at. The business has so developed that an opening scarcely apparent three years ago, but which his father's will took account of as in certain conditions possible and which, under that will, attaches to Chad's availing himself of it a large contingent advantage—this opening, the conditions having come about, now simply awaits him. His mother has kept it for him, holding out against strong pressure, till the last possible moment. It requires, naturally, as it carries with it a handsome "part", a large share in profits, his being on the spot and making a big effort for a big result. That's what I mean by his chance. If he misses it he comes in, as you say, for nothing. And to see that he doesn't miss it is, in a word, what I've come out for.'

She let it all sink in. 'What you've come out for then is simply to render him an immense service.'

Well, poor Strether was willing to take it so. 'Ah if you like.'

'He stands as they say, if you succeed with him, to gain——'

'Oh a lot of advantages.' Strether had them clearly at his fingers' ends.

'By which you mean of course a lot of money.'

'Well, not only. I'm acting with a sense for him of other things too. Consideration and comfort and security—the general safety of being anchored by a strong chain. He

wants, as I see him, to be protected. Protected I mean from life.'

'Ah *voilà*!'—her thought fitted with a click. 'From life. What you *really* want to get him home for is to marry him.'

'Well, that's about the size of it.'

'Of course,' she said, 'it's rudimentary. But to anyone in particular?'

He smiled at this, looking a little more conscious. 'You get everything out.'

For a moment again their eyes met. 'You put everything in!'

He acknowledged the tribute by telling her. 'To Mamie Pocock.'

She wondered; then gravely, even exquisitely, as if to make the oddity also fit: 'His own niece?'

'Oh you must yourself find a new name for the relation. His brother-in-law's sister. Mrs Jim's sister-in-law.'

It seemed to have on Miss Gostrey a certain hardening effect. 'And who in the world's Mrs Jim?'

'Chad's sister—who was Sarah Newsome. She's married —didn't I mention it?—to Jim Pocock.'

'Ah yes,' she tacitly replied; but he had mentioned things ——! Then, however, with all the sound it could have, 'Who in the world's Jim Pocock?' she asked.

'Why Sally's husband. That's the only way we distinguish people at Woollett,' he good-humouredly explained.

'And is it a great distinction—being Sally's husband?'

He considered. 'I think there can be scarcely a greater—unless it may become one, in the future, to be Chad's wife.'

'Then how do they distinguish *you*?'

'They *don't*—except, as I've told you, by the green cover.'

Once more their eyes met on it, and she held him an instant. 'The green cover won't—nor will *any* cover—avail you with *me*. You're of a depth of duplicity!' Still she could in her own large grasp of the real condone it 'Is Mamie a great *parti*?'

'Oh the greatest we have—our prettiest brightest girl.'

Miss Gostrey seemed to fix the poor child. 'I know what they *can* be. And with money?'

'Not perhaps with a great deal of that—but with so much of everything else that we don't miss it. We *don't* miss money much, you know,' Strether added, 'in general, in America, in pretty girls.'

'No,' she conceded; 'but I know also what you do sometimes miss. And do you,' she asked, 'yourself admire her?'

It was a question, he indicated, that there might be several ways of taking; but he decided after an instant for the humorous. 'Haven't I sufficiently showed you how I admire *any* pretty girl?'

Her interest in his problem was by this time such that it scarce left her freedom, and she kept close to the facts. 'I supposed that at Woollett you wanted them—what shall I call it?—blameless. I mean your young men for your pretty girls.'

'So did I,' Strether confessed. 'But you strike there a curious fact—the fact that Woollett too accommodates itself to the spirit of the age and the increasing mildness of manners. Everything changes, and I hold that our situation precisely marks a date. We *should* prefer them blameless, but we have to make the best of them as we find them. Since the spirit of the age and the increasing mildness send them so much more to Paris——'

'You've to take them back as they come. When they *do* come. *Bon!*' Once more she embraced it all, but she had a moment of thought. 'Poor Chad!'

'Ah,' said Strether cheerfully, 'Mamie will save him!'

She was looking away, still in her vision, and she spoke with impatience and almost as if he hadn't understood her. '*You'll* save him. That's who'll save him.'

'Oh but with Mamie's aid. Unless indeed you mean,' he added, 'that I shall effect so much more with yours!'

It made her at last again look at him. 'You'll do more—as you're so much better—than all of us put together.'

'I think I'm only better since I've known *you!*' Strether bravely returned.

The depletion of the place, the shrinkage of the crowd and now comparatively quiet withdrawal of its last elements had already brought them nearer the door and put them in relation with a messenger of whom he bespoke Miss Gostrey's cab. But this left them a few minutes more, which she was clearly in no mood not to use. 'You've spoken to me of what—by your success—Mr Chad stands to gain. But you've not spoken to me of what you do.'

'Oh I've nothing more to gain,' said Strether very simply.

She took it as even quite too simple. 'You mean you've got it all "down"? You've been paid in advance?'

'Ah don't talk about payment!' he groaned.

Something in the tone of it pulled her up, but as their messenger still delayed she had another chance and she put it in another way. 'What—by failure—do you stand to lose?'

He still, however, wouldn't have it. 'Nothing!' he exclaimed, and on the messenger's at this instant reappearing he was able to sink the subject in their responsive advance. When, a few steps up the street, under a lamp, he had put her into her four-wheeler and she had asked him if the man had called for him no second conveyance, he replied before the door was closed. 'You won't take me with you?'

'Not for the world.'

'Then I shall walk.'

'In the rain?'

'I like the rain,' said Strether. 'Good-night!'

She kept him a moment, while his hand was on the door, by not answering; after which she answered by repeating her question. 'What do you stand to lose?'

Why the question now affected him as other he couldn't have said; he could only this time meet it otherwise. 'Everything.'

'So I thought. Then you shall succeed. And to that end I'm yours——'

'Ah, dear lady!' he kindly breathed.

'Till death!' said Maria Gostrey. 'Good-night.'

II

STRETHER CALLED, his second morning in Paris, on the bankers of the Rue Scribe to whom his letter of credit was addressed, and he made this visit attended by Waymarsh, in whose company he had crossed from London two days before. They had hastened to the Rue Scribe on the morrow of their arrival, but Strether had not then found the letters the hope of which prompted this errand. He had had as yet none at all; hadn't expected them in London, but had counted on several in Paris, and, disconcerted now, had presently strolled back to the boulevard with a sense of injury that he felt himself taking for as good a start as any other. It would serve, this spur to his spirit, he reflected, as, pausing at the top of the street, he looked up and down the great foreign avenue, it would serve to begin business with. His idea was to begin business immediately, and it did much for him the rest of his day that the beginning of business awaited him. He did little else till night but ask himself what he should do if he hadn't fortunately had so much to do; but he put himself the question in many different situations and connexions. What carried him hither and yon was an admirable theory that nothing he could do wouldn't be in some manner related to what he fundamentally had on hand, or *would* be—should he happen to have a scruple—wasted for it. He did happen to have a scruple—a scruple about taking no definite step till he should get letters; but this reasoning carried it off. A single day to feel his feet—he had felt them as yet only at Chester and in London—was, he could consider, none too much; and having, as he had often privately expressed it, Paris to reckon with, he threw these hours of freshness consciously into the reckoning. They made it continually greater, but that was what it had best be if it was to be anything at all, and he gave himself up till far into the evening, at the

theatre and on the return, after the theatre, along the bright congested Boulevard, to feeling it grow. Waymarsh had accompanied him this time to the play, and the two men had walked together, as a first stage, from the Gymnase to the Café Riche, into the crowded 'terrace' of which establishment—the night, or rather the morning, for midnight had struck, being bland and populous—they had wedged themselves for refreshment. Waymarsh, as a result of some discussion with his friend, had made a marked virtue of his having now let himself go and there had been elements of impression in their half-hour over their watered beer-glasses that gave him his occasion for conveying that he held this compromise with his stiffer self to have become extreme. He conveyed it—for it was still, after all, his stiffer self who gloomed out of the glare of the terrace—in solemn silence; and there was indeed a great deal of critical silence, every way, between the companions, even till they gained the Place de l'Opéra, as to the character of their nocturnal progress.

This morning there *were* letters—letters which had reached London, apparently all together, the day of Strether's journey, and had taken their time to follow him; so that, after a controlled impulse to go into them in the reception-room of the bank, which, reminding him of the post office at Woollett, affected him as the abutment of some transatlantic bridge, he slipped them into the pocket of his loose grey overcoat with a sense of the felicity of carrying them off. Waymarsh, who had had letters yesterday, had had them again to-day, and Waymarsh suggested in this particular no controlled impulses. The last one he was at all events likely to be observed to struggle with was clearly that of bringing to a premature close any visit to the Rue Scribe Strether had left him there yesterday; he wanted to see the papers, and he had spent, by what his friend could make out, a succession of hours with the papers. He spoke of the establishment, with emphasis, as a post of superior observation; just as he spoke generally of his actual damnable doom as a device for hiding from him

what was going on. Europe was best described, to his mind, as an elaborate engine for dissociating the confined American from that indispensable knowledge, and was accordingly only rendered bearable by these occasional stations of relief, traps for the arrest of wandering western airs. Strether, on his side, set himself to walk again—he had his relief in his pocket; and indeed, much as he had desired his budget, the growth of restlessness might have been marked in him from the moment he had assured himself of the superscription of most of the missives it contained. This restlessness became therefore his temporary law; he knew he should recognise as soon as see it the best place of all for settling down with his chief correspondent. He had for the next hour an accidental air of looking for it in the windows of shops: he came down the Rue de la Paix in the sun and, passing across the Tuileries and the river, indulged more than once—as if on finding himself determined—in a sudden pause before the book-stalls of the opposite quay. In the garden of the Tuileries he had lingered, on two or three spots, to look; it was as if the wonderful Paris spring had stayed him as he roamed. The prompt Paris morning struck its cheerful notes—in a soft breeze and a sprinkled smell, in the light flit, over the garden-floor, of bare-headed girls with the buckled strap of oblong boxes, in the type of ancient thrifty persons basking betimes where terrace-walls were warm, in the blue-frocked brass-labelled officialism of humble rakers and scrapers, in the deep references of a straight-pacing priest or the sharp ones of a white-gaitered red-legged soldier. He watched little brisk figures, figures whose movement was as the tick of the great Paris clock, take their smooth diagonal from point to point; the air had a taste of something mixed with art, something that presented nature as a white-capped master-chef. The palace was gone, Strether remembered the palace; and when he gazed into the irremediable void of its site the historic sense in him might have been freely at play—the play under which in Paris indeed it so often winces like a touched nerve. He filled out spaces with dim symbols of

scenes; he caught the gleam of white statues at the base of which, with his letters out, he could tilt back a straw-bottomed chair. But his drift was, for reasons, to the other side, and it floated him unspent up the Rue de Seine and as far as the Luxembourg.

In the Luxembourg Gardens he pulled up; here at last he found his nook, and here, on a penny chair from which terraces, alleys, vistas, fountains, little trees in green tubs, little women in white caps and shrill little girls at play all sunnily 'composed' together, he passed an hour in which the cup of his impressions seemed truly to overflow. But a week had elapsed since he quitted the ship, and there were more things in his mind than so few days could account for. More than once, during the time, he had regarded himself as admonished; but the admonition, this morning, was formidably sharp. It took as it hadn't done yet the form of a question—the question of what he was doing with such an extraordinary sense of escape. This sense was sharpest after he had read his letters, but that was also precisely why the question pressed. Four of the letters were from Mrs Newsome and none of them short; she had lost no time, had followed on his heels while he moved, so expressing herself that he now could measure the probable frequency with which he should hear. They would arrive, it would seem, her communications, at the rate of several a week; he should be able to count, it might even prove, on more than one by each mail. If he had begun yesterday with a small grievance he had therefore an opportunity to begin to-day with its opposite. He read the letters successively and slowly, putting others back into his pocket but keeping these for a long time afterwards gathered in his lap. He held them there, lost in thought, as if to prolong the presence of what they gave him; or as if at the least to assure them their part in the constitution of some lucidity. His friend wrote admirably, and her tone was even more in her style than in her voice—he might almost, for the hour, have had to come this distance to get its full carrying quality yet the plentitude of his consciousness of difference

consorted perfectly with the deepened intensity of the connexion. It was the difference, the difference of being just where he was and *as* he was, that formed the escape—this difference was so much greater than he had dreamed it would be; and what finally he sat there turning over was the strange logic of his finding himself so free. He felt it in a manner his duty to think out his state, to approve the process, and when he came in fact to trace the steps and add up the items they sufficiently accounted for the sum. He had never expected—that was the truth of it—again to find himself young, and all the years and other things it had taken to make him so were exactly his present arithmetic. He had to make sure of them to put his scruple to rest.

It all sprang at bottom from the beauty of Mrs Newsome's desire that he should be worried with nothing that was not of the essence of his task; by insisting that he should thoroughly intermit and break she had so provided for his freedom that she would, as it were, have only herself to thank. Strether could not at this point indeed have completed his thought by the image of what she might have to thank herself *for*: the image, at best, of his own likeness—poor Lambert Strether washed up on the sunny strand by the waves of a single day, poor Lambert Strether thankful for breathing-time and stiffening himself while he gasped. There he was, and with nothing in his aspect or his posture to scandalise: it was only true that if he had seen Mrs Newsome coming he would instinctively have jumped up to walk away a little. He would have come round and back to her bravely, but he would have had first to pull himself together. She abounded in news of the situation at home, proved to him how perfectly she was arranging for his absence, told him who would take up this and who take up that exactly where he had left it, gave him in fact chapter and verse for the moral that nothing would suffer. It filled for him, this tone of hers, all the air; yet it struck him at the same time as the hum of vain things. This latter effect was what he tried to justify—and with the success that, grave though the appearance, he at last lighted on a form

that was happy. He arrived at it by the inevitable recognition of his having been a fortnight before one of the weariest of men. If ever a man had come off tired Lambert Strether was that man; and hadn't it been distinctly on the ground of his fatigue that his wonderful friend at home had so felt for him and so contrived? It seemed to him somehow at these instants that, could he only maintain with sufficient firmness his grasp of that truth, it might become in a manner his compass and his helm. What he wanted most was some idea that would simplify, and nothing would do this so much as the fact that he was done for and finished. If it had been in such a light that he had just detected in his cup the dregs of youth, that was a mere flaw of the surface of his scheme. He was so distinctly fagged-out that it must serve precisely as his convenience, and if he could but consistently be good for little enough he might do everything he wanted.

Everything he wanted was comprised moreover in a single boon—the common unattainable art of taking things as they came. He appeared to himself to have given his best years to an active appreciation of the way they didn't come; but perhaps—as they would seemingly here be things quite other—this long ache might at last drop to rest. He could easily see that from the moment he should accept the notion of his foredoomed collapse the last thing he would lack would be reasons and memories. Oh if he *should* do the sum no slate would hold the figures! The fact that he had failed, as he considered, in everything, in each relation and in half a dozen trades, as he liked luxuriously to put it, might have made, might still make, for an empty present; but it stood solidly for a crowded past. It had not been, so much achievement missed, a light yoke nor a short load. It was at present as if the backward picture had hung there, the long crooked course, grey in the shadow of his solitude. It had been a dreadful cheerful sociable solitude, a solitude of life or choice, of community; but though there had been people enough all round it there had been but three or four persons *in* it. Waymarsh was one of these, and the fact

struck him just now as marking the record. Mrs Newsome was another, and Miss Gostrey had of a sudden shown signs of becoming a third. Beyond, behind them was the pale figure of his real youth, which held against its breast the two presences paler than itself—the young wife he had early lost and the young son he had stupidly sacrificed. He had again and again made out for himself that he might have kept his little boy, his little dull boy, who had died at school of rapid diphtheria, if he had not in those years so insanely given himself to merely missing the mother. It was the soreness of his remorse that the child had in all likelihood not really been dull—had been dull, as he had been banished and neglected, mainly because the father had been unwittingly selfish. This was doubtless but the secret habit of sorrow, which had slowly given way to time; yet there remained an ache sharp enough to make the spirit, at the sight now and again of some fair young man just growing up, wince with the thought of an opportunity lost. Had ever a man, he had finally fallen into the way of asking himself, lost so much and even done so much for so little? There had been particular reasons why all yesterday, beyond other days, he should have had in one ear this cold inquiry. His name on the green cover, where he had put it for Mrs Newsome, expressed him doubtless just enough to make the world—the world as distinguished, both for more and for less, from Woollett—ask who he was. He had incurred the ridicule of having to have his explanation explained. He was Lambert Strether because he was on the cover, whereas it should have been, for anything like glory, that he was on the cover because he was Lambert Strether. He would have done anything for Mrs Newsome, have been still more ridiculous—as he might, for that matter, have occasion to be yet; which came to saying that this acceptance of fate was all he had to show at fifty-five.

He judged the quantity as small because it *was* small, and all the more egregiously since it couldn't, as he saw the case, so much as thinkably have been larger. He hadn't had the gift of making the most of what he tried, and if he had

tried and tried again—no one but himself knew how often —it appeared to have been that he might demonstrate what else, in default of that, *could* be made. Old ghosts of experiments came back to him, old drudgeries and delusions, and disgusts, old recoveries with their relapses, old fevers with their chills, broken moments of good faith, others of still better doubt; adventures for the most part, of the sort qualified as lessons. The special spring that had constantly played for him the day before was the recognition—frequent enough to surprise him—of the promises to himself that he had after his other visit never kept. The reminiscence to-day most quickened for him was that of the vow taken in the course of the pilgrimage that, newly-married, with the War just over, and helplessly young in spite of it, he had recklessly made with the creature who was so much younger still. It had been a bold dash, for which they had taken money set apart for necessities, but kept sacred at the moment in a hundred ways, and in none more so than by this private pledge of his own to treat the occasion as a relation formed with the higher culture and see that, as they said at Woollett, it should bear a good harvest. He had believed, sailing home again, that he had gained something great, and his theory—with an elaborate innocent plan of reading, digesting, coming back even, every few years—had then been to preserve, cherish and extend it. As such plans as these had come to nothing, however, in respect to acquisitions still more precious, it was doubtless little enough of a marvel that he should have lost account of that handful of seed. Buried for long years in dark corners at any rate these few germs had sprouted again under forty-eight hours of Paris. The process of yesterday had really been the process of feeling the general stirred life of connexions long since individually dropped. Strether had become acquainted even on this ground with short gusts of speculation—sudden flights of fancy in Louvre galleries, hungry gazes through clear plates behind which lemon-coloured volumes were as fresh as fruit on the tree.

These were instants at which he could ask whether, since

there had been fundamentally so little question of his keeping anything, the fate after all decreed for him hadn't been only to *be* kept. Kept for something, in that event, that he didn't pretend, didn't possibly dare as yet to divine; something that made him hover and wonder and laugh and sigh, made him advance and retreat, feeling half ashamed of his impulse to plunge and more than half afraid of his impulse to wait. He remembered for instance how he had gone back in the sixties with lemon-coloured volumes in general on the brain as with a dozen—selected for his wife too—in his trunk; and nothing had at the moment shown more confidence than this invocation of the finer taste. They were still somewhere at home, the dozen—stale and soiled and never sent to the binder; but what had become of the sharp initiation they represented? They represented now the mere sallow paint on the door of the temple of taste that he had dreamed of raising up—a structure he had practically never carried further. Strether's present highest flights were perhaps those in which this particular lapse figured to him as a symbol, a symbol of his long grind and his want of odd moments, his want moreover of money, of opportunity, of positive dignity. That the memory of the vow of his youth should, in order to throb again, have had to wait for this last, as he felt it, of all his accidents—that was surely proof enough of how his conscience had been encumbered. If any further proof were needed it would have been to be found in the fact that, as he perfectly now saw, he had ceased even to measure his meagreness, a meagreness that sprawled, in this retrospect, vague and comprehensive, stretching back like some unmapped Hinterland from a rough coast-settlement. His conscience had been amusing itself for the forty-eight hours by forbidding him the purchase of a book; he held off from that, held off from everything; from the moment he didn't yet call on Chad he wouldn't for the world have taken any other step. On this evidence, however, of the way they actually affected him he glared at the lemon-coloured covers in confession of the subconsciousness that, all the same, in the great desert of the years, he

must have had of them. The green covers at home comprised, by the law of their purpose, no tribute to letters; it was of a mere rich kernel of economics, politics, ethics that, glazed and, as Mrs Newsome maintained, rather against *his* view, pre-eminently pleasant to touch, they formed the specious shell. Without therefore any needed instinctive knowledge of what was coming out, in Paris, on the bright highway, he struck himself at present as having more than once flushed with a suspicion: he couldn't otherwise at present be feeling so many fears confirmed. There were 'movements' he was too late for: weren't they, with the fun of them, already spent? There were sequences he had missed and great gaps in the procession: he might have been watching it all recede in a golden cloud of dust. If the playhouse wasn't closed his seat had at least fallen to somebody else. He had had an uneasy feeling the night before that if he was at the theatre at all—though he indeed justified the theatre, in the specific sense, and with a grotesqueness to which his imagination did all honour, as something he owed poor Waymarsh—he should have been there with, and as might have been said, *for* Chad.

This suggested the question of whether he could properly have taken him to such a play, and what effect—it was a point that suddenly rose—his peculiar responsibility might be held in general to have on his choice of entertainment. It had literally been present to him at the Gymnase—where one was held moreover comparatively safe—that having his young friend at his side would have been an odd feature of the work of redemption; and this quite in spite of the fact that the picture presented might well, confronted with Chad's own private stage, have seemed the pattern of propriety. He clearly hadn't come out in the name of propriety only to visit unattended equivocal performances; yet still less had he done so to undermine his authority by sharing them with the graceless youth. Was he to renounce all amusement for the sweet sake of that authority? and *would* such renouncement give him for Chad a moral glamour? The little problem bristled the more by reason of

poor Strether's fairly open sense of the irony of things. Were there then sides on which his predicament threatened to look rather droll to him? Should he have to pretend to believe—either to himself or the wretched boy—that there was anything that could make the latter worse? Wasn't some such pretence on the other hand involved in the assumption of possible processes that would make him better? His greatest uneasiness seemed to peep at him out of the imminent impression that almost any acceptance of Paris might give one's authority away. It hung before him this morning, the vast bright Babylon, like some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard, in which parts were not to be discriminated nor differences comfortably marked. It twinkled and trembled and melted together, and what seemed all surface one moment seemed all depth the next. It was a place of which, unmistakably, Chad was fond; wherefore if he, Strether, should like it too much, what on earth, with such a bond, would become of either of them? It all depended of course—which was a gleam of light—on how the 'too much' was measured; though indeed our friend fairly felt, while he prolonged the meditation I describe, that for himself even already a certain measure had been reached. It will have been sufficiently seen that he was not a man to neglect any good chance for reflexion. Was it at all possible for instance to like Paris enough without liking it too much? He luckily however hadn't promised Mrs Newsome not to like it at all. He was ready to recognise at this stage that such an engagement *would* have tied his hands. The Luxembourg Gardens were incontestably just so adorable at this hour by reason—in addition to their intrinsic charm—of his not having taken it. The only engagement he had taken, when he looked the thing in the face, was to do what he reasonably could.

It upset him a little none the less and after a while to find himself at last remembering on what current of association he had been floated so far. Old imaginations of the Latin Quarter had played their part for him, and he had duly recalled its having been with this scene of rather

ominous legend that, like so many young men in fiction as well as in fact, Chad had begun. He was now quite out of it, with his 'home', as Strether figured the place, in the Boulevard Malesherbes; which was perhaps why, repairing, not to fail of justice either, to the elder neighbourhood, our friend had felt he could allow for the element of the usual, the immemorial, without courting perturbation. He was not at least in danger of seeing the youth and the particular Person flaunt by together; and yet he was in the very air of which—just to feel what the early natural note must have been—he wished most to take counsel. It became at once vivid to him that he had originally had, for a few days, an almost envious vision of the boy's romantic privilege. Melancholy Mürger, with Francine and Musette and Rodolphe, at home, in the company of the tattered, one—if not in his single self two or three—of the unbound, the paper-covered dozen on the shelf; and when Chad had written, five years ago, after a sojourn then already prolonged to six months, that he had decided to go in for economy and the real thing, Strether's fancy had quite fondly accompanied him in this migration, which was to convey him, as they somewhat confusedly learned at Woollett, across the bridges and up the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève. This was the region—Chad had been quite distinct about it—in which the best French, and many other things, were to be learned at least cost, and in which all sorts of clever fellows, compatriots there for a purpose, formed an awfully pleasant set. The clever fellows, the friendly countrymen were mainly young painters, sculptors, architects, medical students; but they were, Chad sagely opined, a much more profitable lot to be with—even on the footing of not being quite one of them—than the 'terrible toughs' (Strether remembered the edifying discrimination) of the American bars and banks roundabout the Opéra. Chad had thrown out, in the communications following this one—for at that time he did once in a while communicate—that several members of a band of earnest workers under one of the great artists had taken him right in, making him

dine every night, almost for nothing, at their place, and even pressing him not to neglect the hypothesis of there being as much 'in him' as in any of them. There had been literally a moment at which it appeared there might be something in him; there had been at any rate a moment at which he had written that he didn't know but what a month or two more might see him enrolled in some atelier. The season had been one at which Mrs Newsome was moved to gratitude for small mercies; it had broken on them all as a blessing that their absentee *had* perhaps a conscience—that he was sated in fine with idleness, was ambitious of variety. The exhibition was doubtless as yet not brilliant, but Strether himself, even by that time much enlisted and immersed, had determined, on the part of the two ladies, a temperate approval and in fact, as he now recollected, a certain austere enthusiasm.

But the very next thing that happened had been a dark drop of the curtain. The son and brother had not browsed long on the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève—his effective little use of the name of which, like his allusion to the best French, appeared to have been but one of the notes of his rough cunning. The light refreshment of these vain appearances had not accordingly carried any of them very far. On the other hand it had gained Chad time; it had given him a chance, unchecked, to strike his roots, had paved the way for initiations more direct and more deep. It was Strether's belief that he had been comparatively innocent before this first migration, and even that the first effects of the migration would not have been, without some particular bad accident, to have been deplored. There had been three months—he had sufficiently figured it out—in which Chad had wanted to try. He *had* tried, though not very hard—he had had his little hour of good faith. The weakness of this principle in him was that almost any accident attestedly bad enough was stronger. Such had at any rate markedly been the case for the precipitation of a special series of impressions. They had proved, successively, these impressions—all of Musette and Francine, but Musette and

Francine vulgarised by the larger evolution of the type—irresistibly sharp: he had 'taken up', by what was at the time to be shrinkingly gathered, as it was scantily mentioned, with one ferociously 'interested' little person after another. Strether had read somewhere of a Latin motto, a description of the hours, observed on a clock by a traveller in Spain; and he had been led to apply it in thought to Chad's number one, number two, number three. *Omnes vulnerant, ultima necat*—they had all morally wounded, the last had morally killed. The last had been longest in possession—in possession, that is, of whatever was left of the poor boy's finer mortality. And it hadn't been she, it had been one of her early predecessors, who had determined the second migration, the expensive return and relapse, the exchange again, as was fairly to be presumed, of the vaunted best French for some special variety of the worst.

He pulled himself then at last together for his own progress back; not with the feeling that he had taken his walk in vain. He prolonged it a little, in the immediate neighbourhood, after he had quitted his chair; and the upshot of the whole morning for him was that his campaign had begun. He had wanted to put himself in relation, and he would be hanged if he were *not* in relation. He was that at no moment so much as while, under the old arches of the Odéon, he lingered before the charming open-air array of literature classic and casual. He found the effect of tone and tint, in the long charged tables and shelves, delicate and appetising; the impression—substituting one kind of low-priced *consommation* for another—might have been that of one of the pleasant cafés that overlapped, under an awning, to the pavement; but he edged along, grazing the tables, with his hands firmly behind him. He wasn't there to dip, to consume—he was there to reconstruct. He wasn't there for his own profit—not, that is, the direct; he was there on some chance of feeling the brush of the wing of the stray spirit of youth. He felt it in fact, he had it beside him; the old arcade indeed, as his inner sense listened, gave out the faint sound, as from far off, of the wild waving of

wings. They were folded now over the breasts of buried generations; but a flutter or two lived again in the turned page of shock-headed, slouch-hatted loiterers whose young intensity of type, in the direction of pale acuteness, deepened his vision, and even his appreciation, of racial differences, and whose manipulation of the uncut volume was too often, however, but a listening at closed doors. He reconstructed a possible groping Chad of three or four years before, a Chad who had after all, simply—for that was the only way to see it—been too vulgar for his privilege. Surely it *was* a privilege to have been young and happy just there. Well, the best thing Strether knew of him was that he had had such a dream.

But his own actual business half an hour later was with a third floor on the Boulevard Malesherbes—so much as that was definite; and the fact of the enjoyment by the third-floor windows of a continuous balcony, to which he was helped by this knowledge, had perhaps something to do with his lingering for five minutes on the opposite side of the street. There were points as to which he had quite made up his mind, and one of these bore precisely on the wisdom of the abruptness to which events had finally committed him; a policy that he was pleased to find not at all shaken as he now looked at his watch and wondered. He *had* announced himself—six months before; had written out at least that Chad wasn't to be surprised should he see him some day turn up. Chad had thereupon, in a few words of rather carefully colourless answer, offered him a general welcome; and Strether, ruefully reflecting that he might have understood the warning as a hint to hospitality, a bid for an invitation, had fallen back upon silence as the corrective most to his own taste. He had asked Mrs Newsome moreover not to announce him again; he had so distinct an opinion on attacking his job, should he attack it at all, in his own way. Not the least of this lady's high merits for him was that he could absolutely rest on her word. She was the only woman he had known, even at Woollett, as to whom his conviction was positive that to lie was beyond her art.

Sarah Pocock, for instance, her own daughter, though with social ideals, as they said, in some respects different—Sarah who *was*, in her way, aesthetic, had never refused to human commerce that mitigation of rigour; there were occasions when he had distinctly seen her apply it. Since, accordingly, at all events, he had had it from Mrs Newsome that she had, at whatever cost to her more strenuous view, conformed, in the matter of preparing Chad, wholly to his restrictions, he now looked up at the fine continuous balcony with a safe sense that if the case had been bungled the mistake was at least his property. Was there perhaps just a suspicion of that in his present pause on the edge of the boulevard and well in the pleasant light?

Many things came over him here, and one of them was that he should doubtless presently know whether he had been shallow or sharp. Another was that the balcony in question didn't somehow show as a convenience easy to surrender. Poor Strether had at this very moment to recognise the truth that wherever one paused in Paris the imagination reacted before one could stop it. This perpetual reaction put a price, if one could, on pauses; but it piled up consequences till there was scarce room to pick one's steps among them. What call had he, at such a juncture, for example, to like Chad's very house? High broad clear—he was expert enough to make out in a moment that it was admirably built—it fairly embarrassed our friend by the quality that, as he would have said, it 'sprang' on him. He had struck off the fancy that it might, as a preliminary, be of service to him to be seen, by a happy accident, from the third-story windows, which took all the March sun, but of what service was it to find himself making out after a moment that the quality 'sprung', the quality produced by measure and balance, the fine relation of part to part and space to space, was probably—aided by the presence of ornament as positive as it was discreet, and by the complexion of the stone, a cold, fair grey, warmed and polished a little by life—neither more nor less than a case of distinction, such a case as he could only feel unexpectedly as a

sort of delivered challenge? Meanwhile, however, the chance he had allowed for—the chance of being seen in time from the balcony—had become a fact. Two or three of the windows stood open to the violet air; and, before Strether had cut the knot by crossing, a young man had come out and looked about him, had lighted a cigarette and tossed the match over, and then resting on the rail, had given himself up to watching the life below while he smoked. His arrival contributed, in its order, to keeping Strether in position; the result of which in turn was that Strether soon felt himself noticed. The young man began to look at him as in acknowledgment of his being himself in observation.

This was interesting so far as it went, but the interest was affected by the young man's not being Chad. Strether wondered at first if he were perhaps Chad altered, and then saw that this was asking too much of alteration. The young man was light bright and alert—with an air too pleasant to have been arrived at by patching. Strether had conceived Chad as patched, but not beyond recognition. He was in presence, he felt, of amendments enough as they stood; it was a sufficient amendment that the gentleman up there should be Chad's friend. He was young too then, the gentleman up there—he was very young; young enough apparently to be amused at an elderly watcher, to be curious even to see what the elderly watcher would do on finding himself watched. There was youth in that, there was youth in the surrender to the balcony, there was youth for Strether at this moment in everything but his own business; and Chad's thus pronounced association with youth had given the next instant an extraordinary quick lift to the issue. The balcony, the distinguished front testified suddenly, for Strether's fancy, to something that was up and up; they placed the whole case materially, and as by an admirable image, on a level that he found himself at the end of another moment rejoicing to think he might reach. The young man looked at him still, he looked at the young man; and the issue, by a rapid process, was that this knowledge of a perched

privacy appeared to him the last of luxuries. To him too the perched privacy was open, and he saw it now but in one light—that of the only domicile, the only fireside, in the great ironic city, on which he had the shadow of a claim. Miss Gostrey had a fireside; she had told him of it, and it was something that doubtless awaited him; but Miss Gostrey hadn't yet arrived—she mightn't arrive for days; and the sole attenuation of his excluded state was his vision of the small, the admittedly secondary hotel in the bye-street from the Rue de la Paix, in which her solicitude for his purse had placed him, which affected him somehow as all indoor chill, glass-roofed court and slippery staircase, and which, by the same token, expressed the presence of Waymarsh even at times when Waymarsh might have been certain to be round at the bank. It came to pass before he moved that Waymarsh, and Waymarsh alone, Waymarsh not only undiluted but positively strengthened, struck him as the present alternative to the young man in the balcony. When he did move it was fairly to escape that alternative. Taking his way over the street at last and passing through the *porte cochère* of the house was like consciously leaving Waymarsh out. However, he would tell him all about it.

BOOK THIRD

I

STRETHER TOLD Waymarsh all about it that very evening, on their dining together at the hotel; which needn't have happened, he was all the while aware, hadn't he chosen to sacrifice on this occasion a rarer opportunity. The mention to his companion of the sacrifice was moreover exactly what introduced his recital—or, as he would have called it with more confidence in his interlocutor, his confession. His confession was that he had been captured and that one of the features of the affair had just failed to be his engaging himself on the spot to dinner. As by such a freedom Waymarsh would have lost him he had obeyed his scruple; and he had likewise obeyed another scruple—which bore on the question of his himself bringing a guest.

Waymarsh looked gravely ardent, over the finished soup, at this array of scruples; Strether hadn't yet got quite used to being so unprepared for the consequences of the impression he produced. It was comparatively easy to explain, however, that he hadn't felt sure his guest would please. The person was a young man whose acquaintance he had made but that afternoon in the course of rather a hindered inquiry for another person—an inquiry that his new friend had just prevented in fact from being vain. 'Oh,' said Strether, 'I've all sorts of things to tell you!'—and he put it in a way that was a virtual hint to Waymarsh to help him to enjoy the telling. He waited for his fish, he drank of his wine, he wiped his long moustache, he leaned back in his chair, he took in the two English ladies who had just creaked past them and whom he would even have articulately greeted if they hadn't rather chilled the impulse; so that all he could do was—by way of doing something—to

say '*Merci*, François!' out quite loud when his fish was brought. Everything was there that he wanted, everything that could make the moment an occasion, that would do beautifully—everything but what Waymarsh might give. The little waxed *salle-à-manger* was sallow and sociable; François, dancing over it, all smiles, was a man and a brother; the high-shouldered *patronne*, with her high-held, much-rubbed hands, seemed always assenting exuberantly to something unsaid; the Paris evening in short was, for Strether, in the very taste of the soup, in the goodness, as he was innocently pleased to think, of the wine, in the pleasant coarse texture of the napkin and the crunch of the thick-crusted bread. These all were things congruous with his confession, and his confession was that he *had*—it would come out properly just there if Waymarsh would only take it properly—agreed to breakfast out, at twelve literally, the next day. He didn't quite know where; the delicacy of the case came straight up in the remembrance of his new friend's 'We'll see; I'll take you somewhere!'—for it had required little more than that, after all, to let him right in. He was affected after a minute, face to face with his actual comrade, with the impulse to over-colour. There had already been things in respect to which he knew himself tempted by this perversity. If Waymarsh thought them bad he should at least have his reason for his discomfort; so Strether showed them as worse. Still, he was now, in his way, sincerely perplexed.

Chad had been absent from the Boulevard Malesherbes—was absent from Paris altogether; he had learned that from the concierge, but had nevertheless gone up, and gone up—there were no two ways about it—from an uncontrollable, a really, if one would, depraved curiosity. The concierge had mentioned to him that a friend of the tenant of the troisième was for the time in possession; and this had been Strether's pretext for a further inquiry, an experiment carried on, under Chad's roof, without his knowledge. 'I found his friend in fact there keeping the place warm, as he called it, for him; Chad himself being, as appears, in the south. He

went a month ago to Cannes and though his return begins to be looked for it can't be for some days. I might, you see, perfectly have waited a week; might have beaten a retreat as soon as I got this essential knowledge. But I beat no retreat; I did the opposite; I stayed, I dawdled, I trifled; above all I looked round. I saw, in fine; and—I don't know what to call it—I sniffed. It's a detail, but it's as if there were something—something very good—*to* sniff.'

Waymarsh's face had shown his friend an attention apparently so remote that the latter was slightly surprised to find it at this point abreast with him. 'Do you mean a smell? What of?'

'A charming scent. But I don't know.'

Waymarsh gave an inferential grunt. 'Does he live there with a woman?'

'I don't know.'

Waymarsh waited an instant for more, then resumed: 'Has he taken her off with him?'

'And will he bring her back?'—Strether fell into the inquiry. But he wound it up as before. 'I don't know.'

The way he wound it up, accompanied as this was with another drop back, another degustation of the Léoville, another wipe of his moustache and another good word for François, seemed to produce in his companion a slight irritation. 'Then what the devil *do* you know?'

'Well,' said Strether almost gaily, 'I guess I don't know anything!' His gaiety might have been a tribute to the fact that the state he had been reduced to did for him again what had been done by his talk of the matter with Miss Gostrey at the London theatre. It was somehow enlarging; and the air of that amplitude was now doubtless more or less—and all for Waymarsh to feel—in his further response. 'That's what I found out from the young man.'

'But I thought you said you found out nothing.'

'Nothing but that—that I don't know anything.'

'And what good does that do to you?'

'It's just,' said Strether, 'what I've come to you to help me to discover. I mean anything about anything over here.

I *felt* that, up there. It regularly rose before me in its might. The young man moreover—Chad's friend—as good as told me so.'

'As good as told you you know nothing about anything?' Waymarsh appeared to look at some one who might have as good as told *him*. 'How old is he?'

'Well, I guess not thirty.'

'Yet you had to take that from him?'

'Oh I took a good deal more—since, as I tell you, I took an invitation to déjeuner.'

'And are you *going* to that unholy meal?'

'If you'll come with me. He wants you too, you know. I told him about you. He gave me his card,' Strether pursued, 'and his name's rather funny. It's John Little Bilham, and he says his two surnames are, on account of his being small, inevitably used together.'

'Well,' Waymarsh asked with due detachment from these details, 'what's he doing up there?'

'His account of himself is that he's "only a little artist-man". That seems to me perfectly to describe him. But he's yet in the phase of study; this, you know, is the great art-school—to pass a certain number of years in which he came over. And he's a great friend of Chad's, and occupying Chad's rooms just now because they're so pleasant. *He's* very pleasant and curious too,' Strether added—'though he's not from Boston.'

Waymarsh looked already rather sick of him. 'Where *is* he from?'

Strether thought. 'I don't know that, either. But he's "notoriously", as he put it himself, not from Boston.'

'Well,' Waymarsh moralised from dry depths, 'every one can't notoriously *be* from Boston. Why,' he continued, 'is he curious?'

'Perhaps just for *that*—for one thing! But really,' Strether added, 'for everything. When you meet him you'll see.'

'Oh I don't want to meet him,' Waymarsh impatiently growled. 'Why don't he go home?'

Strether hesitated. 'Well, because he likes it over here.'

This appeared in particular more than Waymarsh could bear. 'He ought then to be ashamed of himself, and as you admit that you think so too, why drag him in?'

Strether's reply again took time. 'Perhaps I do think so myself—though I don't quite yet admit it. I'm not a bit sure—it's again one of the things I want to find out. I liked him, and *can* you like people——? But no matter.' He pulled himself up. 'There's no doubt I want you to come down on me and squash me.'

Waymarsh helped himself to the next course, which, however, proving not the dish he had just noted as supplied to the English ladies, had the effect of causing his imagination temporarily to wander. But it presently broke out at a softer spot. 'Have they got a handsome place up there?'

'Oh a charming place; full of beautiful and valuable things. I never saw such a place'—and Strether's thought went back to it. 'For a little artist-man——!' He could in fact scarce express it.

But his companion, who appeared now to have a view, insisted. 'Well?'

'Well, life can hold nothing better. Besides, they're things of which he's in charge.'

'So that he does door-keeper for your precious pair? Can life,' Waymarsh inquired, 'hold nothing better than *that*?' Then as Strether, silent, seemed even yet to wonder, 'Doesn't he know what *she* is?' he went on.

'*I* don't know. I didn't ask him. I couldn't. It was impossible. You wouldn't either. Besides I didn't want to. No more would you.' Strether in short explained it at a stroke. 'You can't make out over here what people do know.'

'Then what did you come over for?'

'Well, I suppose exactly to see for myself—without their aid.'

'Then what do you want mine for?'

'Oh,' Strether laughed, 'you're not one of *them!* I do know what *you* know.'

As, however, this last assertion caused Waymarsh again to look at him hard—such being the latter's doubt of its implications—he felt his justification lame. Which was still more the case when Waymarsh presently said: 'Look here, Strether. Quit this.'

Our friend smiled with a doubt of his own. 'Do you mean my tone?'

'No—damn your tone. I mean you nosing round. Quit the whole job. Let them stew in their juice. You're being used for a thing you ain't fit for. People don't take a fine-tooth comb to groom a horse.'

'Am I a fine-tooth comb?' Strether laughed. 'It's something I never called myself!'

'It's what you are, all the same. You ain't so young as you were, but you've kept your teeth.'

He acknowledged his friend's humour. 'Take care I don't get them into *you!* You'd like them, my friends at home, Waymarsh,' he declared; 'you'd really particularly like them. And I know'—it was slightly irrelevant, but he gave it sudden and singular force—'I know they'd like you!'

'Oh don't work them off on *me!*' Waymarsh groaned.

Yet Strether still lingered with his hands in his pockets. 'It's really quite as indispensable as I say that Chad should be got back.'

'Indispensable to whom? To you?'

'Yes,' Strether presently said.

'Because if you get him you also get Mrs Newsome?'

Strether faced it. 'Yes.'

'And if you don't get him you don't get her?'

It might be merciless, but he continued not to flinch. 'I think it might have some effect on our personal understanding. Chad's of real importance—or can easily become so if he will—to the business.'

'And the business is of real importance to his mother's husband?'

'Well, I naturally want what my future wife wants. And the thing will be much better if we have our own man in it.'

'If you have your own man in it, in other words,' Waymarsh said, 'you'll marry—you personally—more money. She's already rich, as I understand you, but she'll be richer still if the business can be made to boom on certain lines that you've laid down.'

'*I* haven't laid them down, 'Strether promptly returned. 'Mr Newsome—who knew extraordinarily well what he was about—laid them down ten years ago.'

Oh well, Waymarsh seemed to indicate with a shake of his mane, *that* didn't matter! 'You're fierce for the boom anyway.'

His friend weighed a moment in silence the justice of the charge. 'I can scarcely be called fierce, I think, when I so freely take my chance of the possibility, the danger, of being influenced in a sense counter to Mrs Newsome's own feelings.'

Waymarsh gave this proposition a long hard look. 'I see. You're afraid yourself of being squared. But you're a humbug,' he added, 'all the same.'

'Oh!' Strether quickly protested.

'Yes, you ask me for protection—which makes you very interesting; and then you won't take it. You say you want to be squashed——'

'Ah but not so easily! Don't you see,' Strether demanded, 'where my interest, as already shown you, lies? It lies in my not being squared. If I'm squared where's my marriage? If I miss my errand I miss that; and if I miss that I miss everything—I'm nowhere.'

Waymarsh—but all relentlessly—took this in. 'What do I care where you are if you're spoiled?'

Their eyes met on it an instant. 'Thank you awfully,' Strether at last said. 'But don't you think *her* judgment of that——?'

'Ought to content me? No.'

It kept them again face to face, and the end of this was

that Strether again laughed. 'You do her injustice. You really *must* know her. Good night.'

He breakfasted with Mr Bilham on the morrow, and, as inconsequently befell, with Waymarsh massively of the party. The latter announced, at the eleventh hour and much to his friend's surprise, that, damn it, he would as soon join him as do anything else; on which they proceeded together, strolling in a state of detachment practically luxurious for them, to the Boulevard Malesherbes, a couple engaged that day with the sharp spell of Paris as confessedly, it might have been seen, at any couple among the daily thousands so compromised. They walked, wandered, wondered and, a little, lost themselves; Strether hadn't had for years so rich a consciousness of time—a bag of gold into which he constantly dipped for a handful. It was present to him that when the little business with Mr Bilham should be over he would still have shining hours to use absolutely as he liked. There was no great pulse of haste yet in this process of saving Chad; nor was that effect a bit more marked as he sat, half an hour later, with his legs under Chad's mahogany, with Mr Bilham on one side, with a friend of Mr Bilham's on the other, with Waymarsh stupendously opposite, and with the great hum of Paris coming up in softness, vagueness—for Strether himself indeed already positive sweetness—through the sunny windows towards which, the day before, his curiosity had raised its wings from below. The feeling strongest with him at that moment had borne fruit almost faster than he could taste it, and Strether literally felt at the present moment that there was a precipitation in his fate. He had known nothing and nobody as he stood in the street; but hadn't his view now taken a bound in the direction of every one and of every thing?

'What's he up to, what's he up to?'—something like that was at the back of his head all the while in respect to little Bilham; but meanwhile, till he should make out, every one and every thing were as good as represented for him by the

combination of his host and the lady on his left. The lady on his left, the lady thus promptly and ingeniously invited to 'meet' Mr Strether and Mr Waymarsh—it was the way she herself expressed her case—was a very marked person, a person who had much to do with our friend's asking himself if the occasion weren't in its essence the most baited, the most gilded of traps. Baited it could properly be called when the repast was of so wise a savour, and gilded surrounding objects seemed inevitably to need to be when Miss Barrace—which was the lady's name—looked at them with convex Parisian eyes and through a glass with a remarkably long tortoise-shell handle. Why Miss Barrace, mature meagre erect and eminently gay, highly adorned, perfectly familiar, freely contradictious, and reminding him of some last-century portrait of a clever head without powder—why Miss Barrace should have been in particular the note of a 'trap' Strether couldn't on the spot have explained; he blinked in the light of a conviction that he should know later on, and know well—as it came over him, for that matter, with force, that he should need to. He wondered what he was to think exactly of either of his new friends; since the young man, Chad's intimate and deputy, had, in thus constituting the scene, practised so much more subtly than he had been prepared for, and since in especial Miss Barrace, surrounded clearly by every consideration, hadn't scrupled to figure as a familiar object. It was interesting to him to feel that he was in the presence of new measures, other standards, a different scale of relations, and that evidently here were a happy pair who didn't think of things at all as he and Waymarsh thought. Nothing was less to have been calculated in the business than that it should now be for him as if he and Waymarsh were comparatively quite at one.

The latter was magnificent—this at least was an assurance privately given him by Miss Barrace. 'Oh your friend's a type, the grand old American—what shall one call it? The Hebrew prophet. Ezekiel, Jeremiah, who used when I was a

little girl in the Rue Montaigne to come to see my father and who was usually the American Minister to the Tuileries or some other court. I haven't seen one of these ever so many years; the sight of it warms my poor old chilled heart; this specimen is wonderful; in the right quarter, you know, he'll have a *succès fou*.' Strether hadn't failed to ask what the right quarter might be, much as he required his presence of mind to meet such a change in their scheme. 'Oh the artist-quarter and that kind of thing; *here* already, for instance, as you see.' He had been on the point of echoing '"Here"?—*is this* the artist-quarter?' but she had already disposed of the question with a wave of all her tortoise-shell and an easy 'Bring him to *me!*' He knew on the spot how little he should be able to bring him, for the very air was by this time, to his sense, thick and hot with poor Waymarsh's judgment of it. He was in the trap still more than his companion and, unlike his companion, not making the best of it; which was precisely what doubtless gave him his admirable sombre glow. Little did Miss Barrace know that what was behind it was his grave estimate of her own laxity. The general assumption with which our two friends had arrived had been that of finding Mr Bilham ready to conduct them to one or other of those resorts of the earnest, the aesthetic fraternity which were shown among the sights of Paris. In this character it would have justified them in a proper insistence on discharging their score. Waymarsh's only proviso at the last had been that nobody should pay for him; but he found himself, as the occasion developed, paid for on a scale as to which Strether privately made out that he already nursed retribution. Strether was conscious across the table of what worked in him, conscious when they passed back to the small salon to which, the previous evening, he himself had made so rich a reference; conscious most of all as they stepped out to the balcony in which one would have had to be an ogre not to recognise the perfect place for easy aftertastes. These things were enhanced for Miss Barrace by a succession of excellent

cigarettes—acknowledged, acclaimed, as a part of the wonderful supply left behind him by Chad—in an almost equal absorption of which Strether found himself blindly, almost wildly pushing forward. He might perish by the sword as well as by famine, and he knew that his having abetted the lady by an excess that was rare with him would count for little in the sum—as Waymarsh might so easily add it up—of her licence. Waymarsh had smoked of old, smoked hugely; but Waymarsh did nothing now, and that gave him his advantage over people who took things up lightly just when others had laid them heavily down. Strether had never smoked, and he felt as if he flaunted at his friend that this had been only because of a reason. The reason, it now began to appear even to him, was that he had never had a lady to smoke with.

It was this lady's being there at all, however, that was the strange free thing; perhaps, since she *was* there, her smoking was the least of her freedoms. If Strether had been sure at each juncture of what— with Bilham in especial— she talked about, he might have traced others and winced at them and felt Waymarsh wince; but he was in fact so often at sea that his sense of the range of reference was merely general and that he on several different occasions guessed and interpreted only to doubt. He wondered what they meant, but there were things he scarce thought they could be supposed to mean, and 'Oh no—not *that!*' was at the end of most of his ventures. This was the very beginning with him of a condition as to which, later on, as will be seen, he found cause to pull himself up; and he was to remember the moment duly as the first step in a process. The central fact of the place was neither more nor less, when analysed—and a pressure superficial sufficed—than the fundamental impropriety of Chad's situation, round about which they thus seemed cynically clustered. Accordingly, since they took it for granted, they took for granted all that was in connexion with it taken for granted at Woollett—matters as to which, verily, he had been reduced with Mrs

Newsome to the last intensity of silence. That was the consequence of their being too bad to be talked about, and was the accompaniment, by the same token, of a deep conception of their badness. It befell therefore that when poor Strether put it to himself that the badness was ultimately, or perhaps even insolently, what such a scene as the one before him was, so to speak, built upon, he could scarce shirk the dilemma of reading a roundabout echo of them into almost anything that came up. This, he was well aware, was a dreadful necessity; but such was the stern logic, he could only gather, of a relation to the irregular life.

It was the way the irregular life sat upon Bilham and Miss Barrace that was the insidious, the delicate marvel. He was eager to concede that their relation to it was all indirect, for anything else in him would have shown the grossness of bad manners; but the indirectness was none the less consonant—*that* was striking—with a grateful enjoyment of everything that was Chad's. They spoke of him repeatedly, invoking his good name and good nature, and the worst confusion of mind for Strether was that all their mention of him was of a kind to do him honour. They commended his munificence and approved his taste, and in doing so sat down, as it seemed to Strether, in the very soil out of which these things flowered. Our friend's final predicament was that he himself was sitting down, for the time, *with* them, and there was a supreme moment at which, compared with his collapse, Waymarsh's erectness affected him as really high. One thing was certain—he saw he must make up his mind. He must approach Chad, must wait for him, deal with him, master him, but he mustn't dispossess himself of the faculty of seeing things as they were. He must bring him to *him*—not go himself, as it were, so much of the way. He must at any rate be clearer as to what—should he continue to do that for convenience—he was still condoning. It was on the detail of this quantity—and what could the fact be but mystifying?—that Bilham and Miss Barrace threw so little light. So there they were.

II

WHEN MISS Gostrey arrived, at the end of a week, she made him a sign; he went immediately to see her, and it wasn't till then that he could again close his grasp on the idea of a corrective. This idea however was luckily all before him again from the moment he crossed the threshold of the little entresol of the Quartier Marbœuf into which she had gathered, as she said, picking them up in a thousand flights and funny little passionate pounces, the makings of a final nest. He recognised in an instant that there really, there only, he should find the boon with the vision of which he had first mounted Chad's stairs. He might have been a little scared at the picture of how much more, in this place, he should know himself 'in' hadn't his friend been on the spot to measure the amount to his appetite. Her compact and crowded little chambers, almost dusky, as they at first struck him, with accumulations, represented a supreme general adjustment to opportunities and conditions. Wherever he looked he saw an old ivory or an old brocade, and he scarce knew where to sit for fear of a misappliance. The life of the occupant struck him of a sudden as more charged with possession even than Chad's or than Miss Barrace's; wide as his glimpse had lately become of the empire of 'things', what was before him still enlarged it; the lust of the eyes and the pride of life had indeed thus their temple. It was the innermost nook of the shrine—as brown as a pirate's cave. In the brownness were glints of gold; patches of purple were in the gloom; objects all that caught, through the muslin, with their high rarity, the light of the low windows. Nothing was clear about them but that they were precious, and they brushed his ignorance with their contempt as a flower, in a liberty taken with him, might have been whisked under his nose. But after a full look at his hostess he knew none the less what most con-

cerned him. The circle in which they stood together was warm with life, and every question between them would live there as nowhere else. A question came up as soon as they had spoken, for his answer, with a laugh, was quickly: 'Well, they've got hold of me!' Much of their talk on this first occasion was his development of that truth. He was extraordinarily glad to see her, expressing to her frankly what she most showed him, that one might live for years without a blessing unsuspected, but that to know it at last for no more than three days was to need it or miss it for ever. She was the blessing that had now become his need, and what could prove it better than that without her he had lost himself?

'What do you mean?' she asked with an absence of alarm that, correcting him as if he had mistaken the 'period' of one of her pieces, gave him afresh a sense of her easy movement through the maze he had but begun to tread. 'What in the name of all the Pococks have you managed to do?'

'Why exactly the wrong thing. I've made a frantic friend of little Bilham.'

'Ah that sort of thing was the essence of your case and to have been allowed for from the first.' And it was only after this that, quite as a minor matter, she asked who in the world little Bilham might be. When she learned that he was a friend of Chad's and living for the time in Chad's rooms in Chad's absence, quite as if acting in Chad's spirit and serving Chad's cause, she showed, however, more interest. 'Should you mind my seeing him? Only once, you know,' she added.

'Oh the oftener the better: he's amusing—he's original.'

'He doesn't shock you?' Miss Gostrey threw out.

'Never in the world! We escape that with a perfection——! I feel it to be largely, no doubt, because I don't half understand him; but our *modus vivendi* isn't spoiled even by that. You must dine with me to meet him,' Strether went on. 'Then you'll see.'

'Are you giving dinners?'

'Yes—there I am. That's what I mean.'

All her kindness wondered. 'That you're spending too much money?'

'Dear no—they seem to cost so little. But that I do it to *them*. I ought to hold off.'

She thought again—she laughed. 'The money you must be spending to think it cheap! But I must be out of it—to the naked eye.'

He looked for a moment as if she were really failing him. 'Then you won't meet them?' It was almost as if she had developed an unexpected personal prudence.

She hesitated. 'Who are they—first?'

'Why little Bilham to begin with.' He kept back for the moment Miss Barrace. 'And Chad—when he comes—you must absolutely see.'

'When then does he come?'

'When Bilham has had time to write him, and hear from him, about me. Bilham, however,' he pursued, 'will report favourably—favourably for Chad. That will make him not afraid to come. I want you the more therefore, you see, for my bluff.'

'Oh you'll do yourself for your bluff.' She was perfectly easy. 'At the rate you've gone I'm quiet.'

'Ah but I haven't,' said Strether, 'made one protest.'

She turned it over. 'Haven't you been seeing what there's to protest about?'

He let her, with this, however ruefully, have the whole truth.

'I haven't yet found a single thing.'

'Isn't there any one *with* him then?'

'Of the sort I came out about?' Strether took a moment. 'How do I know? And what do I care?'

'Oh oh!'—and her laughter spread. He was struck in fact by the effect on her of his joke. He saw now how he meant it as a joke. *She* saw, however, still other things, though in an instant she had hidden them. 'You've got at no facts at all?'

He tried to muster them. 'Well, he has a lovely home.'

'Ah that, in Paris,' she quickly returned, 'proves nothing. That is rather it *dis*proves nothing. They may very well, you see, the people your mission is concerned with, have done it *for* him.'

'Exactly. And it was on the scene of their doings then that Waymarsh and I sat guzzling.'

'Oh if you forbore to guzzle here on scenes of doings,' she replied, 'you might easily die of starvation.' With which she smiled at him. 'You've worse before you.'

'Ah I've *everything* before me. But on your hypothesis, you know, they must be wonderful.'

'They *are*!' said Miss Gostrey. 'You're not therefore, you see,' she added, 'wholly without facts. They've *been*, in effect, wonderful.'

To have got at something comparatively definite appeared at last a little to help—a wave by which, moreover, the next moment, recollection was washed. 'My young man does admit furthermore that they're our friend's great interest.'

'Is that the expression he uses?'

Strether more exactly recalled. 'No—not quite.'

'Something more vivid? Less?'

He had bent, with neared glasses, over a group of articles on a small stand; and at this he came up. 'It was a mere allusion, but, on the lookout as I was, it struck me. "Awful, you know, as Chad is"—those were Bilham's words.'

'"Awful, you know——"? Oh!'—and Miss Gostrey turned them over. She seemed, however, satisfied. 'Well what more do you want?'

He glanced once more at a *bibelot* or two, but everything sent him back. 'But it *is* all the same as if they wished to let me have it between the eyes.'

She wondered. '*Quoi donc?*'

'Why what I speak of. The amenity. They can stun you with that as well as with anything else.'

'Oh,' she answered, 'you'll come round! I must see them each,' she went on, 'for myself.' I mean Mr Bilham and Mr Newsome—Mr Bilham naturally first. Once only—once for each; that will do. But face to face—for half an hour.

What's Mr Chad,' she immediately pursued, 'doing at Cannes? Decent men don't go to Cannes with the—well, with the kind of ladies you mean.'

'Don't they?' Strether asked with an interest in decent men that amused her.

'No; elsewhere, but not to Cannes. Cannes is different. Cannes is better. Cannes is best. I mean it's all people you know—when you do know them. And if *he* does, why that's different too. He must have gone alone. She can't be with him.'

'I haven't,' Strether confessed in his weakness, 'the least idea.' There seemed much in what she said, but he was able after a little to help her to a nearer impression. The meeting with little Bilham took place, by easy arrangement, in the great gallery of the Louvre; and when, standing with his fellow visitor before one of the splendid Titians—the overwhelming portrait of the young man with the strangely-shaped glove and the blue-grey eyes—he turned to see the third member of their party advance from the end of the waxed and gilded vista, he had a sense of having at last taken hold. He had agreed with Miss Gostrey—it dated even from Chester—for a morning at the Louvre, and he had embraced independently the same idea as thrown out by little Bilham, whom he had already accompanied to the museum of the Luxembourg. The fusion of these schemes presented no difficulty, and it was to strike him again that in little Bilham's company contrarieties in general dropped.

'Oh he's all right—he's one of *us!*' Miss Gostrey, after the first exchange, soon found a chance to murmur to her companion; and Strether, as they proceeded and paused and while a quick unanimity between the two appeared to have phrased itself in half a dozen remarks—Strether knew that he knew almost immediately what she meant, and took it as still another sign that he had got his job in hand. This was the more grateful to him that he could think of the intelligence now serving him as an acquisition positively new. He wouldn't have known even the day before what she meant—that is if she meant, what he assumed, that they

were intense Americans together. He had just worked round —and with a sharper turn of the screw than any yet—to the conception of an American intense as little Bilham was intense. The young man was his first specimen; the specimen had profoundly perplexed him; at present however there was light. It was by little Bilham's amazing serenity that he had at first been affected, but he had inevitably, in his circumspection, felt it as the trail of the serpent, the corruption, as he might conveniently have said, of Europe; whereas the promptness with which it came up for Miss Gostrey but as a special little form of the oldest thing they knew justified it at once to his own vision as well. He wanted to be able to like his specimen with a clear good conscience, and this fully permitted it. What had muddled him was precisely the small artist-man's way—it was so complete—of being more American than anybody. But it now for the time put Strether vastly at his ease to have this view of a new way.

The amiable youth then looked out, as it had first struck Strether, at a world in respect to which he hadn't a prejudice. The one our friend most instantly missed was the usual one in favour of an occupation accepted. Little Bilham had an occupation, but it was only an occupation declined; and it was by his general exemption from alarm, anxiety or remorse on this score that the impression of his serenity was made. He had come out to Paris to paint—to fathom, that is, at large, that mystery; but study had been fatal to him so far as anything *could* be fatal, and his productive power faltered in proportion as his knowledge grew. Strether had gathered from him that at the moment of his finding him in Chad's rooms he hadn't saved from his shipwreck a scrap of anything but his beautiful intelligence and his confirmed habit of Paris. He referred to these things with an equal fond familiarity, and it was sufficiently clear that, as an outfit, they still served him. They were charming to Strether through the hour spent at the Louvre, where indeed they figured for him as an unseparated part of the charged iridescent air, the glamour of the name, the

splendour of the space, the colour of the masters. Yet they were present too wherever the young man led, and the day after the visit to the Louvre they hung, in a different walk, about the steps of our party. He had invited his companions to cross the river with him, offering to show them his own poor place; and his own poor place, which was very poor, gave to his idiosyncrasies, for Strether—the small sublime indifferences and independences that had struck the latter as fresh—an odd and engaging dignity. He lived at the end of an alley that went out of an old short cobbled street, a street that went in turn out of a new long smooth avenue —street and avenue and alley having, however, in common a sort of social shabbiness; and he introduced them to the rather cold and blank little studio which he had lent to a comrade for the term of his elegant absence. The comrade was another ingenuous compatriot, to whom he had wired that tea was to await them 'regardless', and this reckless repast, and the second ingenuous compatriot, and the far-away makeshift life, with its jokes and its gaps, its delicate daubs and its three or four chairs, its overflow of taste and conviction and its lack of nearly all else—these things wove round the occasion a spell to which our hero unreservedly surrendered.

He liked the ingenuous compatriots—for two or three others soon gathered; he liked the delicate daubs and the free discriminations—involving references indeed, involving enthusiasms and execrations that made him, as they said, sit up; he liked above all the legend of good-humoured poverty, of mutual accommodation fairly raised to the romantic, that he soon read into the scene. The ingenuous compatriots showed a candour, he thought, surpassing even the candour of Woollett; they were red-haired and long-legged, they were quaint and queer and dear and droll; they made the place resound with the vernacular, which he had never known so marked as when figuring for the chosen language, he must suppose, of contemporary art. They twanged with a vengeance the aesthetic lyre—they drew from it wonderful airs. This aspect of their life had an admirable

innocence; and he looked on occasion at Maria Gostrey to see to what extent that element reached her. She gave him however for the hour, as she had given him the previous day, no further sign than to show how she dealt with boys; meeting them with the air of old Parisian practice that she had for every one, for everything, in turn. Wonderful about the delicate daubs, masterful about the way to make tea, trustful about the legs of chairs and familiarly reminiscent of those, in the other time, the named, the numbered or the caricatured, who had flourished or failed, disappeared or arrived, she had accepted with the best grace her second course of little Bilham, and had said to Strether, the previous afternoon, on his leaving them, that, since her impression was to be renewed, she would reserve judgment till after the new evidence.

The new evidence was to come, as it proved, in a day or two. He soon had from Maria a message to the effect that an excellent box at the Français had been lent her for the following night; it seeming on such occasions not the least of her merits that she was subject to such approaches. The sense of how she was always paying for something in advance was equalled on Strether's part only by the sense of how she was always being paid; all of which made for his consciousness, in the larger air, of a lively bustling traffic, the exchange of such values as were not for him to handle. She hated, he knew, at the French play, anything but a box —just as she hated at the English anything but a stall; and a box was what he was already in this phase girding himself to press upon her. But she had for that matter her community with little Bilham: she too always, on the great issues, showed as having known in time. It made her constantly beforehand with him and gave him mainly the chance to ask himself how on the day of their settlement their account would stand. He endeavoured even now to keep it a little straight by arranging that if he accepted her invitation she should dine with him first; but the upshot of this scruple was that at eight o'clock on the morrow he awaited her with Waymarsh under the pillared portico.

She hadn't dined with him, and it was characteristic of their relation that she had made him embrace her refusal without in the least understanding it. She ever caused her rearrangements to affect him as her tenderest touches. It was on that principle for instance that, giving him the opportunity to be amiable again to little Bilham, she had suggested his offering the young man a seat in their box. Strether had despatched for this purpose a small blue missive to the Boulevard Malesherbes, but up to the moment of their passing into the theatre he had received no response to his message. He held, however, even after they had been for some time conveniently seated, that their friend, who knew his way about, would come in at his own right moment. His temporary absence moreover seemed, as never yet, to make the right moment for Miss Gostrey. Strether had been waiting till to-night to get back from her in some mirrored form her impressions and conclusions. She had elected, as they said, to see little Bilham once; but now she had seen him twice and had nevertheless not said more than a word.

Waymarsh meanwhile sat opposite him with their hostess between; and Miss Gostrey spoke of herself as an instructor of youth introducing her little charges to a work that was one of the glories of literature. The glory was happily unobjectionable, and the little charges were candid; for herself she had travelled that road and she merely waited on their innocence. But she referred in due time to their absent friend, whom it was clear they should have to give up. 'He either won't have got your note,' she said, 'or you won't have got his: he has had some kind of hindrance, and, of course, for that matter, you know, a man never writes about coming to a box.' She spoke as if, with her look, it might have been Waymarsh who had written to the youth, and the latter's face showed a mixture of austerity and anguish. She went on however as if to meet this. 'He's far and away, you know, the best of them.'

'The best of whom, ma'am?'

'Why of all the long procession—the boys, the girls, or the old men and old women as they sometimes really are; the hope, as one may say, of our country. They've all passed, year after year; but there has been no one in particular I've ever wanted to stop. I feel—don't *you*?—that I want to stop little Bilham; he's so exactly right as he is.' She continued to talk to Waymarsh. 'He's too delightful. If he'll only not spoil it! But they always *will*; they always do; they always have.'

'I don't think Waymarsh knows,' Strether said after a moment, 'quite what it's open to Bilham to spoil.'

'It can't be a good American,' Waymarsh lucidly enough replied, 'for it didn't strike me the young had developed much in *that* shape.'

'Ah,' Miss Gostrey sighed, 'the name of the good American is as easily given as taken away! What *is* it, to begin with, to *be* one, and what's the extraordinary hurry? Surely nothing that's so pressing was ever so little defined. It's such an order, really, that before we cook you the dish we must at least have your receipt. Besides, the poor chicks have time! What I've seen so often spoiled,' she pursued, 'is the happy attitude itself, the state of faith and—what shall I call it?—the sense of beauty. You're right about him'—she now took in Strether—'little Bilham has them to a charm; we must keep little Bilham along.' Then she was all again for Waymarsh. 'The others have all wanted so dreadfully to do something, and they've gone and done it in too many cases indeed. It leaves them never the same afterwards; the charm's always somehow broken. Now *he*, I think, you know, really won't. He won't do the least dreadful little thing. We shall continue to enjoy him just as he is. No—he's quite beautiful. He sees everything. He isn't a bit ashamed. He has every scrap of the courage of it that one could ask. Only think what he *might* do. One wants really —for fear of some accident—to keep him in view. At this very moment perhaps what mayn't he be up to? I've had my disappointments—the poor things are never really safe; or only at least when you have them under your eye. One

can never completely trust them. One's uneasy, and I think that's why I most miss him now.'

She had wound up with a laugh of enjoyment over her embroidery of her idea—an enjoyment that her face communicated to Strether, who almost wished none the less at this moment that she would let poor Waymarsh alone. *He* knew more or less what she meant; but the fact wasn't a reason for her not pretending to Waymarsh that he didn't. It was craven of him perhaps, but he would, for the high amenity of the occasion, have liked Waymarsh not to be so sure of his wit. Her recognition of it gave him away and, before she had done with him or with that article, would give him worse. What was he, all the same, to do? He looked across the box at his friend; their eyes met; something queer and stiff, something that bore on the situation but that it was better not to touch, passed in silence between them. Well, the effect of it for Strether was an abrupt reaction, a final impatience of his own tendency to temporise. Where was that taking him anyway? It was one of the quiet instants that sometimes settle more matters than the outbreaks dear to the historic muse. The only qualification of the quietness was the synthetic 'Oh hang it!' into which Strether's share of the silence soundlessly flowered. It represented, this mute ejaculation, a final impulse to burn his ships. These ships, to the historic muse, may seem of course mere cockles, but when he presently spoke to Miss Gostrey it was with the sense at least of applying the torch. 'Is it then a conspiracy?'

'Between the two young men? Well, I don't pretend to be a seer or a prophetess,' she presently replied; 'but if I'm simply a woman of sense he's working for you to-night. I don't quite know how—but it's in my bones.' And she looked at him at last as if, little material as she yet gave him, he'd really understand. 'For an opinion *that's* my opinion. He makes you out too well not to.'

'Not to work for me to-night?' Strether wondered. 'Then I hope he isn't doing anything bad.'

'They've got you,' she portentously answered

'Do you mean he *is*——?'

'They've got you,' she merely repeated. Though she disclaimed the prophetic vision she was at this instant the nearest approach he had ever met to the priestess of the oracle. The light was in her eyes. 'You must face it now.'

He faced it on the spot. 'They *had* arranged——?'

'Every move in the game. And they've been arranging ever since. He has had every day his little telegram from Cannes.'

It made Strether open his eyes. 'Do you *know* that?'

'I do better. I see it. This was, before I met him, what I wondered whether I *was* to see. But as soon as I met him I ceased to wonder, and our second meeting made me sure. I took him all in. He was acting—he is still—on his daily instructions.'

'So that Chad has done the whole thing?'

'Oh no—not the whole. *We've* done some of it. You and I and "Europe".'

'Europe—yes,' Strether mused.

'Dear old Paris,' she seemed to explain. But there was more, and, with one of her turns, she risked it. 'And dear old Waymarsh. You,' she declared, 'have been a good bit of it.'

He sat massive. 'A good bit of what, ma'am?'

'Why of the wonderful consciousness of our friend here. You've helped too in your way to float him to where he is.'

'And where the devil *is* he?'

She passed it on with a laugh. 'Where the devil, Strether, are you?'

He spoke as if he had just been thinking it out. 'Well, quite already in Chad's hands, it would seem.' And he had had with this another thought. 'Will that be—just all through Bilham—the way he's going to work it? It would be for him, you know, an idea. And Chad with an idea——!'

'Well?' she asked while the image held him.

'Well, is Chad—what shall I say?—monstrous?'

'Oh as much as you like! But the idea you speak of,' she

said, 'won't have been his best. He'll have a better. It won't be all through little Bilham that he'll work it'

This already sounded almost like a hope destroyed. 'Through whom else then?'

'That's what we shall see!' But quite as she spoke she turned, and Strether turned; for the door of the box had opened, with the click of the *ouvreuse*, from the lobby, and a gentleman, a stranger to them, had come in with a quick step. The door closed behind him, and, though their faces showed him his mistake, his air, which was striking, was all good confidence. The curtain had just again risen, and, in the hush of the general attention, Strether's challenge was tacit, as was also the greeting, with a quickly-deprecating hand and smile, of the unannounced visitor. He discreetly signed that he would wait, would stand, and these things and his face, one look from which she had caught, had suddenly worked for Miss Gostrey. She fitted to them all an answer for Strether's last question. The solid stranger was simply the answer—as she now, turning to her friend, indicated. She brought it straight out for him—it presented the intruder. 'Why, through this gentleman!' The gentleman indeed, at the same time, though sounding for Strether a very short name, did practically as much to explain. Strether gasped the name back—then only had he seen. Miss Gostrey had said more than she knew. They were in presence of Chad himself.

Our friend was to go over it afterwards again and again —he was going over it much of the time that they were together, and they were together constantly for three or four days: the note had been so strongly struck during that first half-hour that everything happening since was comparatively a minor development. The fact was that his perception of the young man's identity—so absolutely checked for a minute—had been quite one of the sensations that count in life; he certainly had never known one that had acted, as he might have said, with more of a crowded rush. And the rush, though both vague and multitudinous, had lasted a long time, protected, as it were, yet at the same time

aggravated, by the circumstances of its coinciding with a stretch of decorous silence. They couldn't talk without disturbing the spectators in the part of the balcony just below them; and it, for that matter, came to Strether—being a thing of the sort that did come to him—that these were the accidents of a high civilisation; the imposed tribute to propriety, the frequent exposure to conditions, usually brilliant, in which relief has to await its time. Relief was never quite near at hand for kings, queens, comedians and other such people, and though you might be yourself not exactly one of those, you could yet, in leading the life of high pressure, guess a little how they sometimes felt. It was truly the life of high pressure that Strether had seemed to feel himself lead while he sat there, close to Chad, during the long tension of the act. He was in presence of a fact that occupied his whole mind, that occupied for the half-hour his senses themselves all together; but he couldn't without inconvenience show anything—which moreover might count really as luck. What he might have shown, had he shown at all, was exactly the kind of emotion—the emotion of bewilderment—that he had proposed to himself from the first, whatever should occur, to show least. The phenomenon that had suddenly sat down there with him was a phenomenon of change so complete that his imagination, which had worked so beforehand, felt itself, in the connexion, without margin or allowance. It had faced every contingency but that Chad should not *be* Chad, and this was what it now had to face with a mere strained smile and an uncomfortable flush.

He asked himself if, by any chance, before he should have in some way to commit himself, he might feel his mind settled to the new vision, might habituate it, so to speak, to the remarkable truth. But oh it was too remarkable, the truth; for what could be more remarkable than this sharp rupture of an identity? You could deal with a man as himself—you couldn't deal with him as somebody else. It was a small source of peace moreover to be reduced to wondering how little he might know in such an event what a sum he

was setting you. He couldn't absolutely not know, for you couldn't absolutely not let him. It was a *case* then simply, a strong case, as people nowadays called such things, a case of transformation unsurpassed, and the hope was but in the general law that strong cases were liable to control from without. Perhaps he, Strether himself, was the only person after all aware of it. Even Miss Gostrey, with all her science, wouldn't be, would she?—and he had never seen any one less aware of anything than Waymarsh as he glowered at Chad. The social sightlessness of his old friend's survey marked for him afresh, and almost in a humiliating way, the inevitable limits of direct aid from this source. He was not certain, however, of not drawing a shade of compensation from the privilege, as yet untasted, of knowing more about something in particular than Miss Gostrey did. His situation too was a case, for that matter, and he was now so interested, quite so privately agog, about it, that he had already an eye to the fun it would be to open up to her afterwards. He derived during his half-hour no assistance from her, and just this fact of her not meeting his eyes played a little, it must be confessed, into his predicament.

He had introduced Chad, in the first minutes, under his breath, and there was never the primness in her of the person unacquainted; but she had none the less betrayed at first no vision but of the stage, where she occasionally found a pretext for an appreciative moment that she invited Waymarsh to share. The latter's faculty of participation had never had, all round, such an assault to meet; the pressure on him being the sharper for this chosen attitude in her, as Strether judged it, of isolating, for their natural intercourse, Chad and himself. This intercourse was mean while restricted to a frank friendly look from the young man, something markedly like a smile, but falling far short of a grin, and to the vivacity of Strether's private speculation as to whether *he* carried himself like a fool. He didn't quite see how he could so feel as one without somehow showing as one. The worst of that question moreover was that he knew it as a symptom the sense of which annoyed

him. 'If I'm to be odiously conscious of how I may strike the fellow,' he reflected, 'it was so little what I came out for that I may as well stop before I begin.' This sage consideration too, distinctly, seemed to leave untouched the fact that he *was* going to be conscious. He was conscious of everything but of what would have served him.

He was to know afterwards, in the watches of the night, that nothing would have been more open to him than after a minute or two to propose to Chad to seek with him the refuge of the lobby. He hadn't only not proposed it, but had lacked even the presence of mind to see it as possible. He had stuck there like a schoolboy wishing not to miss a minute of the show; though for that portion of the show then presented he hadn't had an instant's real attention. He couldn't when the curtain fell have given the slightest account of what had happened. He had therefore, further, not at that moment acknowledged the amenity added by this acceptance of his awkwardness to Chad's general patience. Hadn't he none the less known at the very time—known it stupidly and without reaction—that the boy was accepting something? He was modestly benevolent, the boy—that was at least what he had been capable of the superiority of making out his chance to be; and one had one's self literally not had the gumption to get in ahead of him. If we should go into all that occupied our friend in the watches of the night we should have to mend our pen; but an instance or two may mark for us the vividness with which he could remember. He remembered the two absurdities that, if his presence of mind *had* failed, were the things that had had most to do with it. He had never in his life seen a young man come into a box at ten o'clock at night, and would, if challenged on the question in advance, scarce have been ready to pronounce as to different ways of doing so. But it was in spite of this definite to him that Chad had had a way that was wonderful: a fact carrying with it an implication that, as one might imagine it, he knew, he had learned, how.

Here already then were abounding results; he had on the

spot and without the least trouble of intention taught Strether that even in so small a thing as that there were different ways. He had done in the same line still more than this; had by a mere shake or two of the head made his old friend observe that the change in him was perhaps more than anything else, for the eye, a matter of the marked streaks of grey, extraordinary at his age, in his thick black hair; as well as that this new feature was curiously becoming to him, did something for him, as characterisation, also even —of all things in the world—as refinement, that had been a good deal wanted. Strether felt, however, he would have had to confess, that it wouldn't have been easy just now, on this and other counts, in the presence of what had been supplied, to be quite clear as to what had been missed. A reflexion a candid critic might have made of old, for instance, was that it would have been much happier for the son to look more like the mother; but this was a reflexion that at present would never occur. The ground had quite fallen away from it, yet no resemblance whatever to the mother had supervened. It would have been hard for a young man's face and air to disconnect themselves more completely than Chad's at this juncture from any discerned, from any imaginable aspect of a New England female parent. That of course was no more than had been on the cards; but it produced in Strether none the less one of those frequent phenomena of mental reference with which all judgment in him was actually beset.

Again and again as the days passed he had had a sense of the pertinence of communicating quickly with Woollett—communicating with a quickness with which telegraphy alone would rhyme; the fruit really of a fine fancy in him for keeping things straight, for the happy forestalment of error. No one could explain better when needful, nor put more conscience into an account or a report; which burden of conscience is perhaps exactly the reason why his heart always sank when the clouds of explanation gathered. His highest ingenuity was in keeping the sky of life clear of them. Whether or no he had a grand idea of the lucid, he

held that nothing ever was in fact—for any one else—explained. One went through the vain motions, but it was mostly a waste of life. A personal relation was a relation only so long as people either perfectly understood or, better still, didn't care if they didn't. From the moment they cared if they didn't it was living by the sweat of one's brow; and the sweat of one's brow was just what one might buy one's self off from by keeping the ground free of the wild weed of delusion. It easily grew too fast, and the Atlantic cable now alone could race with it. That agency would each day have testified for him to something that was not what Woollett had argued. He was not at this moment absolutely sure that the effect of the morrow's—or rather of the night's—appreciation of the crisis wouldn't be to determine some brief missive. 'Have at last seen him, but oh dear!'—some temporary relief of that sort seemed to hover before him. It hovered somehow as preparing them all—yet preparing them for what? If he might do so more luminously and cheaply he would tick out in four words: 'Awfully old—grey hair.' To this particular item in Chad's appearance he constantly, during their mute half-hour, reverted; as if so very much more than he could have said had been involved in it. The most he could have said would have been: 'If he's going to make me feel young——!' which indeed, however, carried with it quite enough. If Strether was to feel young, that is, it would be because Chad was to feel old; and an aged and hoary sinner had been no part of the scheme.

The question of Chadwick's true time of life was, doubtless, what came up quickest after the adjournment of the two, when the play was over, to a café in the Avenue de l'Opéra. Miss Gostrey had in due course been perfect for such a step; she had known exactly what they wanted—to go straight somewhere and talk; and Strether had even felt that she had known what he wished to say and that he was arranging immediately to begin. She hadn't pretended this, as she *had* pretended, on the other hand, to have divined Waymarsh's wish to extend to her an independent protection homeward; but Strether nevertheless found how, after

he had Chad opposite to him at a small table in the brilliant halls that his companion straightway selected, sharply and easily discriminated from others, it was quite, to his mind, as if she heard him speak; as if, sitting up, a mile away, in the little apartment he knew, she would listen hard enough to catch. He found too that he liked that idea, and he wished that, by the same token, Mrs Newsome might have caught as well. For what had above all been determined in him as a necessity of the first order was not to lose another hour, nor a fraction of one; was to advance, to overwhelm, with a rush. This was how he would anticipate—by a night-attack, as might be—any forced maturity that a crammed consciousness of Paris was likely to take upon itself to assert on behalf of the boy. He knew to the full, on what he had just extracted from Miss Gostrey, Chad's marks of alertness; but they were a reason the more for not dawdling. If he was himself moreover to be treated as young he wouldn't at all events be so treated before he should have struck out at least once. His arms might be pinioned afterwards, but it would have been left on record that he was fifty. The importance of this he had indeed begun to feel before they left the theatre; it had become a wild unrest, urging him to seize his chance. He could scarcely wait for it as they went; he was on the verge of the indecency of bringing up the question in the street; he fairly caught himself going on—so he afterwards invidiously named it—as if there would be for him no second chance should the present be lost. Not till, on the purple divan before the perfunctory *bock*, he had brought out the words themselves, was he sure, for that matter, that the present would be saved.

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BOOK FOURTH

I

'I'VE COME, you know, to make you break with everything, neither more nor less, and take you straight home; so you'll be so good as immediately and favourably to consider it!' —Strether, face to face with Chad after the play, had sounded these words almost breathlessly, and with an effect at first positively disconcerting to himself alone. For Chad's receptive attitude was that of a person who had been gracefully quiet while the messenger at last reaching him has run a mile through the dust. During some seconds after he had spoken Strether felt as if *he* had made some such exertion; he was not even certain that the perspiration wasn't on his brow. It was the kind of consciousness for which he had to thank the look that, while the strain lasted, the young man's eyes gave him. They reflected—and the deuce of the thing was that they reflected really with a sort of shyness of kindness—his momentarily disordered state; which fact brought on in its turn for our friend the dawn of a fear that Chad might simply 'take it out'—take everything out—in being sorry for him. Such a fear, any fear, was unpleasant. But everything was unpleasant; it was odd how everything had suddenly turned so. This, however, was no reason for letting the least thing go. Strether had the next minute proceeded as roundly as if with an advantage to follow up. 'Of course I'm a busybody, if you want to fight the case to the death; but after all mainly in the sense of having known you and having given you such attention as you kindly permitted when you were in jackets and knickerbockers. Yes—it was knickerbockers, I'm busybody enough to remember that; and that you had, for your age—I speak of the first far-away time—tremendously stout legs. Well, we

want you to break. Your mother's heart's passionately set upon it, but she has above and beyond that excellent arguments and reasons. I've not put them into her head—I needn't remind you how little she's a person who needs that. But they exist—you must take it from me as a friend both of hers and yours—for myself as well. I didn't invent them, I didn't originally work them out; but I understand them, I think I can explain them—by which I mean make you actively do them justice; and that's why you see me here. You had better know the worst at once. It's a question of an immediate rupture and an immediate return. I've been conceited enough to dream I can sugar that pill. I take at any rate the greatest interest in the question. I took it already before I left home; and I don't mind telling you that, altered as you are, I take it still more now that I've seen you. You're older and—I don't know what to call it! —more of a handful; but you're by so much the more, I seem to make out, to our purpose.'

'Do I strike you as improved?' Strether was to recall that Chad had at this point inquired.

He was likewise to recall—and it had to count for some time as his greatest comfort—that it had been 'given' him, as they said at Woollett, to reply with some presence of mind: 'I haven't the least idea.' He was really for a while to like thinking he had been positively hard. On the point of conceding that Chad had improved in appearance, but that to the question of appearance the remark must be confined, he checked even that compromise and left his reservation bare. Not only his moral, but also, as it were, his aesthetic sense had a little to pay for this, Chad being unmistakably —and wasn't it a matter of the confounded grey hair again? —handsomer than he had ever promised. That, however, fell in perfectly with what Strether had said. They had no desire to keep down his proper expansion, and he wouldn't be less to their purpose for not looking, as he had too often done of old, only bold and wild. There was indeed a signal particular in which he would distinctly be more so. Strether didn't, as he talked, absolutely follow himself; he only knew

he was clutching his thread and that he held it from moment to moment a little tighter; his mere uninterruptedness during the few minutes helped him to do that. He had frequently, for a month, turned over what he should say on this very occasion, and he seemed at last to have said nothing he had thought of—everything was so totally different.

But in spite of that he had put the flag at the window. This was what he had done, and there was a minute during which he affected himself as having shaken it hard, flapped it with a mighty flutter, straight in front of his companion's nose. It gave him really almost the sense of having already acted his part. The momentary relief—as if from the knowledge that nothing of *that* at least could be undone—sprang from a particular cause, the cause that had flashed into operation, in Miss Gostrey's box, with direct apprehension, with amazed recognition, and that had been concerned since then in every throb of his consciousness. What it came to was that with an absolutely *new* quantity to deal with one simply couldn't know. The new quantity was represented by the fact that Chad had been made over. That was all; whatever it was it was everything. Strether had never seen the thing so done before—it was perhaps a speciality of Paris. If one had been present at the process one might little by little have mastered the result; but he was face to face, as matters stood, with the finished business. It had freely been noted for him that he might be received as a dog among skittles, but that was on the basis of the old quantity. He had originally thought of lines and tones as things to be taken, but these possibilities had now quite melted away. There was no computing at all what the young man before him would think or feel or say on any subject whatever. This intelligence Strether had afterwards, to account for his nervousness, reconstituted as he might, just as he had also reconstituted the promptness with which Chad had corrected his uncertainty. An extraordinarily short time had been required for the correction, and there had ceased to be anything negative in his companion's face and air as soon as it was made. 'Your engagement to my mother

has become then what they call here a *fait accompli*?'—it had consisted, the determinant touch, in nothing more than that.

Well, that was enough, Strether had felt while his answer hung fire. He had felt at the same time, however, that nothing could less become him than that it should hang fire too long. 'Yes,' he said brightly, 'it was on the happy settlement of the question that I started. You see therefore to what tune I'm in your family. Moreover,' he added, 'I've been supposing you'd suppose it.'

'Oh I've been supposing it for a long time, and what you tell me helps me to understand that you should want to do something. To do something, I mean,' said Chad, 'to commemorate an event so—what do they call it?—so auspicious. I see you make out, and not unnaturally,' he continued, 'that bringing me home in triumph as a sort of wedding-present to Mother would commemorate it better than anything else. You want to make a bonfire in fact,' he laughed, 'and you pitch me on. Thank you, thank you!' he laughed again.

He was altogether easy about it, and this made Strether now see how at bottom, and in spite of the shade of shyness that really cost him nothing, he had from the first moment been easy about everything. The shade of shyness was mere good taste. People with manners formed could apparently have, as one of their best cards, the shade of shyness too. He had leaned a little forward to speak; his elbows were on the table; and the inscrutable new face that he had got somewhere and somehow was brought by the movement nearer to his critic's. There was a fascination for that critic in its not being, this ripe physiognomy, the fact that, under observation at least, he had originally carried away from Woollett. Strether found a certain freedom on his own side in defining it as that of a man of the world—a formula that indeed seemed to come now in some degree to his relief; that of a man to whom things had happened and were variously known. In gleams, in glances, the past did perhaps peep out of it; but such lights were faint and instantly

merged. Chad was brown and thick and strong; and of old Chad had been rough. Was all the difference therefore that he was actually smooth? Possibly; for that he *was* smooth was as marked as in the taste of a sauce or in the rub of a hand. The effect of it was general—it had retouched his features, drawn them with a cleaner line. It had cleared his eyes and settled his colour and polished his fine square teeth—the main ornament of his face; and at the same time that it had given him a form and a surface, almost a design, it had toned his voice, established his accent, encouraged his smile to more play and his other motions to less. He had formerly, with a great deal of action, expressed very little; and he now expressed whatever was necessary with almost none at all. It was as if in short he had really, copious perhaps but shapeless, been put into a firm mould and turned successfully out. The phenomenon—Strether kept eyeing it as a phenomenon, an eminent case—was marked enough to be touched by the finger. He finally put his hand across the table and laid it on Chad's arm. 'If you'll promise me—here on the spot and giving me your word of honour—to break straight off, you'll make the future the real right thing for all of us alike. You'll ease off the strain of this decent but none the less acute suspense in which I've for so many days been waiting for you, and let me turn in to rest. I shall leave you with my blessing and go to bed in peace.'

Chad again fell back at this and, his hands pocketed, settled himself a little; in which posture he looked, though he rather anxiously smiled, only the more earnest. Then Strether seemed to see that he was really nervous, and he took that as what he would have called a wholesome sign. The only mark of it hitherto had been his more than once taking off and putting on his wide-brimmed crush hat. He had at this moment made the motion again to remove it, then had only pushed it back, so that it hung informally on his strong young grizzled crop. It was a touch that gave the note of the familiar—the intimate and the belated—to their quiet colloquy; and it was indeed by some such trivial aid that Strether became aware at the same moment of

something else. The observation was at any rate determined in him by some light too fine to distinguish from so many others, but it was none the less sharply determined. Chad looked unmistakably during these instants—well, as Strether put it to himself, all he was worth. Our friend had a sudden apprehension of what that would on certain sides be. He saw him in a flash as the young man marked out by women; and for a concentrated minute the dignity, the comparative austerity, as he funnily fancied it, of this character affected him almost with awe. There was an experience on his interlocutor's part that looked out at him from under the displaced hat, and that looked out moreover by a force of its own, the deep fact of its quantity and quality, and not through Chad's intending bravado or swagger. That was then the way men marked out by women *were*—and also the men by whom the women were doubtless in turn sufficiently distinguished. It affected Strether for thirty seconds as a relevant truth; a truth which, however, the next minute, had fallen into its relation. 'Can't you imagine there being some questions,' Chad asked, 'that a fellow—however much impressed by your charming way of stating things—would like to put to you first?'

'Oh yes—easily. I'm here to answer everything. I think I can even tell you things, of the greatest interest to you, that you won't know enough to ask me. We'll take as many days to it as you like. But I want,' Strether wound up, 'to go to bed now.'

'Really?'

Chad had spoken in such surprise that he was amused. 'Can't you believe it?—with what you put me through?'

The young man seemed to consider. 'Oh I haven't put you through much—yet.'

'Do you mean there's so much more to come?' Strether laughed. 'All the more reason then that I should gird myself.' And as if to mark what he felt he could by this time count on he was already on his feet.

Chad, still seated, stayed him, with a hand against him,

as he passed him between their table and the next. 'Oh we shall get on!'

The tone was, as who should say, everything Strether could have desired; and quite as good the expression of face with which the speaker had looked up at him and kindly held him. All these things lacked was their not showing quite so much as the fruit of experience. Yes, experience was what Chad did play on him, if he didn't play any grossness of defiance. Of course experience was in a manner defiance; but it wasn't, at any rate—rather indeed quite the contrary—grossness; which was so much gained. He fairly grew older, Strether thought, while he himself so reasoned. Then with his mature pat of his visitor's arm he also got up; and there had been enough of it all by this time to make the visitor feel that something *was* settled. Wasn't it settled that he had at least the testimony of Chad's own belief in a settlement? Strether found himself treating Chad's profession that they would get on as a sufficient basis for going to bed. He hadn't nevertheless after this gone to bed directly; for when they had again passed out together into the mild bright night a check had virtually sprung from nothing more than a small circumstance which might have acted only as confirming quiescence. There were people, expressive sound, projected light, still abroad, and after they had taken in for a moment, through everything, the great clear architectural street, they turned off in tacit union to the quarter of Strether's hotel. 'Of course,' Chad here abruptly began, 'of course Mother's making things out with you about me has been natural—and of course also you've had a good deal to go upon. Still, you must have filled out.'

He had stopped, leaving his friend to wonder a little what point he wished to make; and this it was that enabled Strether meanwhile to make one. 'Oh we've never pretended to go into detail. We weren't in the least bound to *that*. It was "filling out" enough to miss you as we did.'

But Chad rather oddly insisted, though under the high lamp at their corner, where they paused, he had at first looked as if touched by Strether's allusion to the long sense,

at home, of his absence. 'What I mean is you must have imagined.'

'Imagined what?'

'Well—horrors.'

It affected Strether: horrors were so little—superficially at least—in this robust and reasoning image. But he was none the less there to be veracious. 'Yes, I dare say we *have* imagined horrors. But where's the harm if we haven't been wrong?'

Chad raised his face to the lamp, and it was one of the moments at which he had, in his extraordinary way, most his air of designedly showing himself. It was as if at these instants he just presented himself, his identity so rounded off, his palpable presence and his massive young manhood, as such a link in the chain as might practically amount to a kind of demonstration. It was as if—and how but anomalously?—he couldn't after all help thinking sufficiently well of these things to let them go for what they were worth. What could there be in this for Strether but the hint of some self-respect, some sense of power, oddly perverted; something latent and beyond access, ominous and perhaps enviable? The intimation had the next thing, in a flash, taken on a name—a name on which our friend seized as he asked himself if he weren't perhaps really dealing with an irreducible young Pagan. This description—he quite jumped at it—had a sound that gratified his mental ear, so that of a sudden he had already adopted it. Pagan—yes, that was, wasn't it? what Chad *would* logically be. It was what he must be. It was what he was. The idea was a clue and, instead of darkening the prospect, projected a certain clearness. Strether made out in this quick ray that a Pagan was perhaps, at the pass they had come to, the thing most wanted at Woollett. They'd be able to do with one—a good one; he'd find an opening—yes; and Strether's imagination even now prefigured and accompanied the first appearance there of the rousing personage. He had only the slight discomfort of feeling, as the young man turned away from the lamp, that his thought had in the momentary silence

possibly been guessed. 'Well, I've no doubt,' said Chad, 'you've come near enough. The details, as you say, don't matter. It *has* been generally the case that I've let myself go. But I'm coming round—I'm not so bad now.' With which they walked on again to Strether's hotel.

'Do you mean,' the latter asked as they approached the door, 'that there isn't any woman with you now?'

'But pray what has that to do with it?'

'Why it's the whole question.'

'Of my going home?' Chad was clearly surprised. 'Oh not much! Do you think that when I want to go any one will have any power——'

'To keep you'—Strether took him straight up—'from carrying out your wish? Well, our idea has been that somebody had hitherto—or a good many persons perhaps—kept you pretty well from "wanting". That's what—if you're in anybody's hands—may again happen. You don't answer my question'—he kept it up; 'but if you aren't in anybody's hands so much the better. There's nothing then but what makes for your going.'

Chad turned this over. 'I don't answer your question?' He spoke quite without resenting it. 'Well, such questions have always a rather exaggerated side. One doesn't know quite what you mean by being in women's "hands". It's all so vague. One is when one isn't. One isn't when one is. And then one can't quite give people away.' He seemed kindly to explain. 'I've *never* got stuck—so very hard; and, as against anything at any time really better, I don't think I've ever been afraid.' There was something in it that held Strether to wonder, and this gave him time to go on. He broke out as with a more helpful thought. 'Don't you know how I like Paris itself?'

The upshot was indeed to make our friend marvel. 'Oh if *that's* all that's the matter with you——!' It was *he* who almost showed resentment.

Chad's smile of a truth more than met it. 'But isn't that enough?'

Strether hesitated, but it came out. 'Not enough for your

mother!' Spoken, however, it sounded a trifle odd—the effect of which was that Chad broke into a laugh. Strether, at this, succumbed as well, though with extreme brevity. 'Permit us to have still our theory. But if you *are* so free and so strong you're inexcusable. I'll write in the morning,' he added with decision. 'I'll say I've got you.'

This appeared to open for Chad a new interest. 'How often do you write?'

'Oh perpetually.'

'And at great length?'

Strether had become a little impatient. 'I hope it's not found too great.'

'Oh, I'm sure not. And you hear as often?'

Again Strether paused. 'As often as I deserve.'

'Mother writes,' said Chad, 'a lovely letter.'

Strether, before the closed porte-cochère, fixed him a moment. 'It's more, my boy, than *you* do! But our suppositions don't matter,' he added, 'if you're actually not entangled.'

Chad's pride seemed none the less a little touched. 'I never *was* that—let me insist. I always had my own way.' With which he pursued: 'And I have it at present.'

'Then what are you here for? What has kept you,' Strether asked, 'if you *have* been able to leave?'

It made Chad, after a stare, throw himself back. 'Do you think one's kept only by women?' His surprise and his verbal emphasis rang out so clear in the still street that Strether winced till he remembered the safety of their English speech. 'Is that,' the young man demanded, 'what they think at Woollett?' At the good faith in the question Strether had changed colour, feeling that, as he would have said, he had put his foot in it. He had appeared stupidly to misrepresent what they thought at Woollett; but before he had time to rectify Chad again was upon him. 'I must say then you show a low mind!'

It so fell in, unhappily for Strether, with that reflexion of his own prompted in him by the pleasant air of the Boulevard Malesherbes, that its disconcerting force was

rather unfairly great. It was a dig that, administered by himself—and administered even to poor Mrs Newsome—was no more than salutary; but administered by Chad—and quite logically—it came nearer drawing blood. They *hadn't* a low mind—nor any approach to one; yet incontestably they had worked, and with a certain smugness, on a basis that might be turned against them. Chad had at any rate pulled his visitor up; he had even pulled up his admirable mother; he had absolutely, by a turn of the wrist and a jerk of the far-flung noose, pulled up, in a bunch, Woollett browsing in its pride. There was no doubt Woollett *had* insisted on his coarseness; and what he at present stood there for in the sleeping street was, by his manner of striking the other note, to make of such insistence a preoccupation compromising to the insisters. It was exactly as if they had imputed to him a vulgarity which he had by a mere gesture caused to fall from him. The devil of the case was that Strether felt it, by the same stroke, as falling straight upon himself. He had been wondering a minute ago if the boy weren't a Pagan, and he found himself wondering now if he weren't by chance a gentleman. It didn't in the least, on the spot, spring up helpfully for him that a person couldn't at the same time be both. There was nothing at this moment in the air to challenge the combination; there was everything to give it on the contrary something of a flourish. It struck Strether into the bargain as doing something to meet the most difficult of the questions; though perhaps indeed only by substituting another. Wouldn't it be precisely by having learned to be a gentleman that he had mastered the consequent trick of looking so well that one could scarce speak to him straight? But what in the world was the clue to such a prime producing cause? There were too many clues then that Strether still lacked, and these clues to clues were among them. What it accordingly amounted to for him was that he had to take full in the face a fresh attribution of ignorance. He had grown used by this time to reminders, especially from his own lips, of what he didn't know; but he had borne them because in the first place they were

private and because in the second they practically conveyed a tribute. He didn't know what was bad, and—as others didn't know how little he knew it—he could put up with his state. But if he didn't know, in so important a particular, what was good, Chad at least was now aware he didn't; and that, for some reason, affected our friend as curiously public. It was in fact an exposed condition that the young man left him in long enough for him to feel its chill—till he saw fit, in a word, generously again to cover him. This last was in truth what Chad quite gracefully did. But he did it as with a simple thought that met the whole of the case. 'Oh I'm all right!' It was what Strether had rather bewilderedly to go to bed on.

II

IT REALLY looked true moreover from the way Chad was to behave after this. He was full of attentions to his mother's ambassador; in spite of which, all the while, the latter's other relations rather remarkably contrived to assert themselves. Strether's sittings pen in hand with Mrs Newsome up in his own room were broken, yet they were richer; and they were more than ever interspersed with the hours in which he reported himself, in a different fashion, but with scarce less earnestness and fullness, to Maria Gostrey. Now that, as he would have expressed it, he had really something to talk about he found himself, in respect to any oddity that might reside for him in the double connexion, at once more aware and more indifferent. He had been fine to Mrs Newsome about his useful friend, but it had begun to haunt his imagination that Chad, taking up again for her benefit a pen too long disused, might possibly be finer. It wouldn't at all do, he saw, that anything should come up for him at Chad's hands but what specifically *was* to have come; the greatest divergence from which would be precisely the element of any lubrication of their intercourse

by levity. It was accordingly to forestall such an accident that he frankly put before the young man the several facts, just as they had occurred, of his funny alliance. He spoke of these facts, pleasantly and obligingly, as 'the whole story', and felt that he might qualify the alliance as funny if he remained sufficiently grave about it. He flattered himself that he even exaggerated the wild freedom of his original encounter with the wonderful lady; he was scrupulously definite about the absurd conditions in which they had made acquaintance—their having picked each other up almost in the street; and he had (finest inspiration of all!) a conception of carrying the war into the enemy's country by showing surprise at the enemy's ignorance.

He had always had a notion that this last was the grand style of fighting; the greater therefore the reason for it, as he couldn't remember that he had ever before fought in the grand style. Every one, according to this, knew Miss Gostrey: how came it Chad didn't know her? The difficulty, the impossibility, was really to escape it; Strether put on him, by what he took for granted, the burden of proof of the contrary. This tone was so far successful as that Chad quite appeared to recognise her as a person whose fame had reached him, but against his acquaintance with whom much mischance had worked. He made the point at the same time that his social relations, such as they could be called, were perhaps not to the extent Strether supposed with the rising flood of their compatriots. He hinted at his having more and more given way to a different principle of selection; the moral of which seemed to be that he went about little in the 'colony'. For the moment certainly he had quite another interest. It was deep, what he understood; and Strether, for himself, could only so observe it. He couldn't see as yet how deep. Might he not all too soon! For there was really too much of their question that Chad had already committed himself to liking. He liked, to begin with, his prospective stepfather; which was distinctly what had not been on the cards. His hating him was the untowardness for which Strether had been best prepared; he

hadn't expected the boy's actual form to give him more to do than his imputed. It gave him more through suggesting that he must somehow make up to himself for not being sure he was sufficiently disagreeable. That had really been present to him as his only way to be sure he was sufficiently thorough. The point was that if Chad's tolerance of his thoroughness were insincere, were but the best of devices for gaining time, it none the less did treat everything as tacitly concluded.

That seemed at the end of ten days the upshot of the abundant, the recurrent talk through which Strether poured into him all it concerned him to know, put him in full possession of facts and figures. Never cutting these colloquies short by a minute, Chad behaved, looked and spoke as if he were rather heavily, perhaps even a trifle gloomily, but none the less fundamentally and comfortably free. He made no crude profession of eagerness to yield, but he asked the most intelligent questions, probed, at moments, abruptly, even deeper than his friend's layer of information, justified by these touches the native estimate of his latent stuff, and had in every way the air of trying to live, reflectively, into the square bright picture. He walked up and down in front of this production, sociably took Strether's arm at the points at which he stopped, surveyed it repeatedly from the right and from the left, inclined a critical head to either quarter, and, while he puffed a still more critical cigarette, animadverted to his companion on this passage and that. Strether sought relief—there were hours when he required it—in repeating himself; it was in truth not to be blinked that Chad had a way. The main question as yet was of what it was a way *to*. It made vulgar questions no more easy; but that was unimportant when all questions save those of his own asking had dropped. That he was free was answer enough, and it wasn't quite ridiculous that this freedom should end by presenting itself as what was difficult to move. His changed state, his lovely home, his beautiful things, his easy talk, his very appetite for Strether, insatiable and, when all was said, flattering—

what were such marked matters all but the notes of his freedom? He had the effect of making a sacrifice of it just in these handsome forms to his visitor; which was mainly the reason the visitor was privately, for the time, a little out of countenance. Strether was at this period again and again thrown back on a felt need to remodel somehow his plan. He fairly caught himself shooting rueful glances, shy looks of pursuit, toward the embodied influence, the definite adversary, who had by a stroke of her own failed him and on a fond theory of whose palpable presence he had, under Mrs Newsome's inspiration, altogether proceeded. He had once or twice, in secret, literally expressed the irritated wish that *she* would come out and find her.

He couldn't quite yet force it upon Woollett that such a career, such a perverted young life, showed after all a certain plausible side, *did* in the case before them flaunt something like an impunity for the social man; but he could at least treat himself to the statement that would prepare him for the sharpest echo. This echo—as distinct over there in the dry thin air as some shrill 'heading' above a column of print—seemed to reach him even as he wrote. 'He says there's no woman,' he could hear Mrs Newsome report, in capitals almost of newspaper size, to Mrs Pocock; and he could focus in Mrs Pocock the response of the reader of the journal. He could see in the younger lady's face the earnestness of her attention and catch the full scepticism of her but slightly delayed 'What is there then?' Just so he could again as little miss the mother's clear decision: 'There's plenty of disposition, no doubt, to pretend there isn't.' Strether had, after posting his letter, the whole scene out; and it was a scene during which, coming and going, as befell, he kept his eye not least upon the daughter. He had his fine sense of the conviction Mrs Pocock would take occasion to reaffirm—a conviction bearing, as he had from the first deeply divined it to bear, on Mr Strether's essential inaptitude. She had looked him in his conscious eyes even before he sailed, and that she didn't believe *he* would find the woman had been written in her book. Hadn't she at the

best but a scant faith in his ability to find women? It wasn't even as if he had found her mother—so much more, to her discrimination, had her mother performed the finding. Her mother had, in a case her private judgment of which remained educative of Mrs Pocock's critical sense, found the man. The man owed his unchallenged state, in general, to the fact that Mrs Newsome's discoveries were accepted at Woollett; but he knew in his bones, our friend did, how almost irresistibly Mrs Pocock would now be moved to show what she thought of his own. Give *her* a free hand, would be the moral, and the woman would soon be found.

His impression of Miss Gostrey after her introduction to Chad was meanwhile an impression of a person almost unnaturally on her guard. He struck himself as at first unable to extract from her what he wished; though indeed *of* what he wished at this special juncture he would doubtless have contrived to make but a crude statement. It sifted and settled nothing to put to her, *tout bêtement*, as she often said, 'Do you like him, eh?'—thanks to his feeling it actually the least of his needs to heap up the evidence in the young man's favour. He repeatedly knocked at her door to let her have it afresh that Chad's case—whatever else of minor interest it might yield—was first and foremost a miracle almost monstrous. It was the alteration of the entire man, and was so signal an instance that nothing else, for the intelligent observer, could—*could* it?—signify. 'It's a plot,' he declared—'there's more in it than meets the eye.' He gave the rein to his fancy. 'It's a plant!'

His fancy seemed to please her. 'Whose then?'

'Well, the party responsible is, I suppose, the fate that waits for one, the dark doom that rides. What I mean is that with such elements one can't count. I've but my poor individual, my modest human means. It isn't playing the game to turn on the uncanny. All one's energy goes to facing it, to tracking it. One wants, confound it, don't you see?' he confessed with a queer face—'one wants to enjoy anything so rare. Call it then life'—he puzzled it out—'call it poor dear old life simply that springs the surprise.

Nothing alters the fact that the surprise is paralysing, or at any rate engrossing—all, practically, hang it, that one sees, that one *can* see.'

Her silences were never barren, nor even dull. 'Is that what you've written home?'

He tossed it off. 'Oh dear, yes!'

She had another pause while, across her carpets, he had another walk. 'If you don't look out you'll have them straight over.'

'Oh but I've said he'll go back.'

'And *will* he?' Miss Gostrey asked.

The special tone of it made him, pulling up, look at her long. 'What's that but just the question I've spent treasures of patience and ingenuity in giving *you*, by the sight of him —after everything had led up—every facility to answer? What is it but just the thing I came here to-day to get out of you? Will he?'

'No—he won't,' she said at last. 'He's not free.'

The air of it held him. 'Then you've all the while known——?'

'I've known nothing but what I've seen; and I wonder,' she declared with some impatience, 'that you didn't see as much. It was enough to be with him there——'

'In the box? Yes,' he rather blankly urged.

'Well—to feel sure.'

'Sure of what?'

She got up from her chair, at this, with a nearer approach than she had ever yet shown to dismay at his dimness. She even, fairly pausing for it, spoke with a shade of pity. 'Guess!'

It was a shade, fairly, that brought a flush into his face; so that for a moment, as they waited together, their difference was between them. 'You mean that just your hour with him told you so much of his story? Very good; I'm not such a fool, on my side, as that I don't understand you, or as that I didn't in some degree understand *him*. That he has done what he liked most isn't, among any of us, a matter the least in dispute. There's equally little

question at this time of day of what it is he does like most. But I'm not talking,' he reasonably explained, 'of any mere wretch he may still pick up. I'm talking of some person who in his present situation may have held her own, may really have counted.'

'That's exactly what *I* am!' said Miss Gostrey. But she as quickly made her point. 'I thought you thought—or that they think at Woollett—that that's what mere wretches necessarily do. Mere wretches necessarily *don't!*' she declared with spirit. 'There must, behind every appearance to the contrary, still be somebody—somebody who's not a mere wretch, since we accept the miracle. What else but such a somebody can such a miracle be?'

He took it in. 'Because the fact itself *is* the woman?'

'*A* woman. Some woman or other. It's one of the things that *have* to be.'

'But you mean then at least a good one.'

'A good woman?' She threw up her arms with a laugh. 'I should call her excellent!'

'Then why does he deny her?'

Miss Gostrey thought a moment. 'Because she's too good to admit! Don't you see,' she went on, 'how she accounts for him?'

Strether clearly, more and more, did see; yet it made him also see other things. 'But isn't what we want that he shall account for *her*?'

'Well, he does. What you have before you is his way. You must forgive him if it isn't quite outspoken. In Paris such debts are tacit.'

Strether could imagine; but still——! 'Even when the woman's good?'

Again she laughed out. 'Yes, and even when the man is! There's always a caution in such cases,' she more seriously explained—'for what it may seem to show. There's nothing that's taken as showing so much here as sudden unnatural goodness.'

'Ah then you're speaking now,' Strether said, 'of people who are *not* nice.'

'I delight,' she replied, 'in your classifications. But do you want me,' she asked, 'to give you in the matter, on this ground, the wisest advice I'm capable of? Don't consider her, don't judge her at all in herself. Consider her and judge her only in Chad.'

He had the courage at least of his companion's logic. 'Because then I shall like her?' He almost looked, with his quick imagination, as if he already did, though seeing at once also the full extent of how little it would suit his book. 'But is that what I came out for?'

She had to confess indeed that it wasn't. But there was something else. 'Don't make up your mind. There are all sorts of things. You haven't seen him all.'

This on his side Strether recognised; but his acuteness none the less showed him the danger. 'Yes, but if the more I see the better he seems?'

Well, she found something. 'That may be—but his disavowal of her isn't, all the same, pure consideration. There's a hitch.' She made it out. 'It's the effort to sink her.'

Strether winced at the image. 'To "sink"——?'

'Well, I mean there's a struggle, and a part of it is just what he hides. Take time—that's the only way not to make some mistake that you'll regret. Then you'll see. He really does want to shake her off.'

Our friend had by this time so got into the vision that he almost gasped. 'After all she has done for him?'

Miss Gostrey gave him a look which broke the next moment into a wonderful smile. 'He's not so good as you think!'

They remained with him, these words, promising him, in their character of warning, considerable help; but the support he tried to draw from them found itself on each renewal of contact with Chad defeated by something else. What could it be, this disconcerting force, he asked himself, but the sense, constantly renewed, that Chad *was*—quite in fact insisted on being—as good as he thought? It seemed somehow as if he couldn't *but* be as good from the moment

he wasn't as bad. There was a succession of days at all events when contact with him—and in its immediate effect, as if it could produce no other—elbowed out of Strether's consciousness everything but itself. Little Bilham once more pervaded the scene, but little Bilham became even in a higher degree than he had originally been one of the numerous forms of the inclusive relation; a consequence promoted, to our friend's sense, by two or three incidents with which we have yet to make acquaintance. Waymarsh himself, for the occasion, was drawn into the eddy; it absolutely, though but temporarily, swallowed him down, and there were days when Strether seemed to bump against him as a sinking swimmer might brush a submarine object. The fathomless medium held them—Chad's manner was the fathomless medium; and our friend felt as if they passed each other, in their deep immersion, with the round impersonal eye of silent fish. It was practically produced between them that Waymarsh was giving him then his chance; and the shade of discomfort that Strether drew from the allowance resembled not a little the embarrassment he had known at school, as a boy, when members of his family had been present at exhibitions. He could perform before strangers, but relatives were fatal, and it was now as if, comparatively, Waymarsh were a relative. He seemed to hear him say 'Strike up then!' and to enjoy a foretaste of conscientious domestic criticism. He *had* struck up, so far as he actually could; Chad knew by this time in profusion what he wanted; and what vulgar violence did his fellow pilgrim expect of him when he had really emptied his mind? It went somehow to and fro that what poor Waymarsh meant was 'I told you so—that you'd lose your immortal soul!' but it was also fairly explicit that Strether had his own challenge and that, since they must go to the bottom of things, he wasted no more virtue in watching Chad than Chad wasted in watching him. His dip for duty's sake—where was it worse than Waymarsh's own? For *he* needn't have stopped resisting and refusing, needn't have parleyed, at that rate, with the foe.

The strolls over Paris to see something or call somewhere were accordingly inevitable and natural, and the late sessions in the wondrous troisième, the lovely home, when men dropped in and the picture composed more suggestively through the haze of tobacco, of music more or less good and of talk more or less polyglot, were on a principle not to be distinguished from that of the mornings and the afternoons. Nothing, Strether had to recognise as he leaned back and smoked, could well less resemble a scene of violence than even the liveliest of these occasions. They were occasions of discussion, none the less, and Strether had never in his life heard so many opinions on so many subjects. There were opinions at Woollett, but only on three or four. The differences were there to match; if they were doubtless deep, though few, they were quiet—they were, as might be said, almost as shy as if people had been ashamed of them. People showed little diffidence about such things, on the other hand, in the Boulevard Malesherbes, and were so far from being ashamed of them—or indeed of anything else—that they often seemed to have invented them to avert those agreements that destroy the taste of talk. No one had ever done that at Woollett, though Strether could remember times when he himself had been tempted to it without quite knowing why. He saw why at present—he had but wanted to promote intercourse.

These, however, were but parenthetic memories; and the turn taken by his affair on the whole was positively that if his nerves were on the stretch it was because he missed violence. When he asked himself if none would then, in connexion with it, ever come at all, he might almost have passed as wondering how to provoke it. It would be too absurd if such a vision as *that* should have to be invoked for relief; it was already marked enough as absurd that he should actually have begun with flutters and dignities on the score of a single accepted meal. What sort of a brute had he expected Chad to be, anyway?—Strether had occasion to make the inquiry but was careful to make it in private. He could himself, comparatively recent as it was—

it was truly but the fact of a few days since—focus his primal crudity; but he would on the approach of an observer, as if handling an illicit possession, have slipped the reminiscence out of sight. There were echoes of it still in Mrs Newsome's letters, and there were moments when these echoes made him exclaim on her want of tact. He blushed, of course, at once, still more for the explanation than for the ground of it: it came to him in time to save his manners that she couldn't at the best become tactful as quickly as he. Her tact had to reckon with the Atlantic Ocean, the General Post-Office and the extravagant curve of the globe.

Chad had one day offered tea at the Boulevard Malesherbes to a chosen few, a group again including the unobscured Miss Barrace; and Strether had on coming out walked away with the acquaintance whom in his letters to Mrs Newsome he always spoke of as the little artist-man. He had had full occasion to mention him as the other party, so oddly, to the only close personal alliance observation had as yet detected in Chad's existence. Little Bilham's way this afternoon was not Strether's, but he had none the less kindly come with him, and it was somehow a part of his kindness that as it had sadly begun to rain they suddenly found themselves seated for conversation at a café in which they had taken refuge. He had passed no more crowded hour in Chad's society than the one just ended; he had talked with Miss Barrace, who had reproached him with not having come to see her, and he had above all hit on a happy thought for causing Waymarsh's tension to relax. Something might possibly be extracted for the latter from the idea of his success with that lady, whose quick apprehension of what might amuse her had given Strether a free hand. What had she meant if not to ask whether she couldn't help him with his splendid encumbrance, and mightn't the sacred rage at any rate be kept a little in abeyance by thus creating for his comrade's mind even in a world of irrelevance the possibility of a relation? What was it but a relation to be regarded as so decorative and, in

especial, on the strength of it, to be whirled away, amid flounces and feathers, in a coupé lined, by what Strether could make out, with dark blue brocade? He himself had never been whirled away—never at least in a coupé and behind a footman; he had driven with Miss Gostrey in cabs, with Mrs Pocock, a few times, in an open buggy, with Mrs Newsome in a four-seated cart and, occasionally up at the mountains, on a buckboard; but his friend's actual adventure transcended his personal experience. He now showed his companion soon enough indeed how inadequate, as a general monitor, this last queer quantity could once more feel itself.

'What game under the sun is he playing?' He signified the next moment that his allusion was not to the fat gentleman immersed in dominoes on whom his eyes had begun by resting, but to their host of the previous hour, as to whom, there on the velvet bench, with a final collapse of all consistency, he treated himself to the comfort of indiscretion. 'Where do you see him come out?'

Little Bilham, in meditation, looked at him with a kindness almost paternal. 'Don't you like it over here?'

Strether laughed out—for the tone was indeed droll; he let himself go. 'What has that to do with it? The only thing I've any business to like is to feel that I'm moving him. That's why I ask you whether you believe I *am*. Is the creature'—and he did his best to show that he simply wished to ascertain—'honest?'

His companion looked responsible, but looked it through a small dim smile. 'What creature do you mean?'

It was on this that they did have for a little a mute interchange. 'Is it true that he's free? How then,' Strether asked wondering, 'does he arrange his life?'

'Is the creature you mean Chad himself?' little Bilham said.

Strether here, with a rising hope, just thought, 'We must take one of them at a time.' But his coherence lapsed. '*Is* there some woman? Of whom he's really afraid of course I mean—or who does with him what she likes.'

'It's awfully charming of you,' Bilham presently remarked, 'not to have asked me that before.'

'Oh I'm not fit for my job!'

The exclamation had escaped our friend, but it made little Bilham more deliberate. 'Chad's a rare case!' he luminously observed. 'He's awfully changed,' he added.

'Then you see it too?'

'The way he has improved? Oh yes—I think every one must see it. But I'm not sure,' said little Bilham, 'that I didn't like him about as well in his other state.'

'Then this *is* really a new state altogether?'

'Well,' the young man after a moment returned, 'I'm not sure he was really meant by nature to be quite so good. It's like the new edition of an old book that one has been fond of—revised and amended, brought up to date, but not quite the thing that one knew and loved. However that may be at all events,' he pursued, 'I don't think, you know, that he's really playing, as you call it, any game. I believe he really wants to go back and take up a career. He's capable of one, you know, that will improve and enlarge him still more. He won't then,' little Bilham continued to remark, 'be my pleasant well-rubbed old-fashioned volume at all. But of course I'm beastly immoral. I'm afraid it would be a funny world altogether—a world with things the way I like them. I ought, I dare say, to go home and go into business myself. Only I'd simply rather die—simply. And I've not the least difficulty in making up my mind not to, and in knowing exactly why, and in defending my ground against all comers. All the same,' he wound up, 'I assure you I don't say a word against it—for himself, I mean—to Chad. I seem to see it as much the best thing for him. You see he's not happy.'

'*Do* I?'—Strether stared. 'I've been supposing I see just the opposite—an extraordinary case of the equilibrium arrived at and assured.'

'Oh there's a lot behind it.'

'Ah there you are!' Strether exclaimed. 'That's just what

I want to get at. You speak of your familiar volume altered out of recognition. Well, who's the editor?'

Little Bilham looked before him a minute in silence. 'He ought to get married. *That* would do it. And he wants to.'

'Wants to marry her?'

Again little Bilham waited, and, with a sense that he had information, Strether scarce knew what was coming. 'He wants to be free. He isn't used, you see,' the young man explained in his lucid way, 'to being so good.'

Strether hesitated. 'Then I may take it from you that he *is* good?'

His companion matched his pause, but making it up with a quiet fullness. '*Do* take it from me.'

'Well then why isn't he free? He swears to me he is, but meanwhile does nothing—except of course that he's so kind to me—to prove it; and couldn't really act much otherwise if he weren't. My question to you just now was exactly on this queer impression of his diplomacy; as if instead of really giving ground his line were to keep me on here and set me a bad example.'

As the half-hour meanwhile had ebbed Strether paid his score, and the waiter was presently in the act of counting out change. Our friend pushed back to him a fraction of it, with which, after an emphatic recognition, the personage in question retreated. 'You give too much,' little Bilham permitted himself benevolently to observe.

'Oh I always give too much!' Strether helplessly sighed. 'But you don't,' he went on as if to get quickly away from the contemplation of that doom, 'answer my question. Why isn't he free?'

Little Bilham had got up as if the transaction with the waiter had been a signal, and had already edged out between the table and the divan. The effect of this was that a minute later they had quitted the place, the gratified waiter alert again at the open door. Strether had found himself deferring to his companion's abruptness as to a hint that he should be answered as soon as they were more isolated. This happened when after a few steps in the outer air they

had turned the next corner. There our friend had kept it up. 'Why isn't he free if he's good?'

Little Bilham looked him full in the face. 'Because it's a virtuous attachment.'

This had settled the question so effectually for the time —that is for the next few days—that it had given Strether almost a new lease on life. It must be added however that, thanks to his constant habit of shaking the bottle in which life handed him the wine of experience, he presently found the taste of the lees rising as usual into his draught. His imagination had in other words already dealt with his young friend's assertion; of which it had made something that sufficiently came out on the very next occasion of his seeing Maria Gostrey. This occasion moreover had been determined promptly by a new circumstance—a circumstance he was the last man to leave her for a day in ignorance of. 'When I said to him last night,' he immediately began, 'that without some definite word from him now that will enable me to speak to them over there of our sailing—or at least of mine, giving them some sort of date—my responsibility becomes uncomfortable and my situation awkward; when I said that to him what do you think was his reply?' And then as she this time gave it up: 'Why that he had two particular friends, two ladies, mother and daughter, about to arrive in Paris—coming back from an absence; and that he wants me so furiously to meet them, know them and like them, that I shall oblige him by kindly not bringing our business to a crisis till he has had a chance to see them again himself. Is that,' Strether inquired, 'the way he's going to try to get off? These are the people,' he explained, 'that he must have gone down to see before I arrived. They're the best friends he has in the world, and they take more interest than any one else in what concerns him. As I'm his next best he sees a thousand reasons why we should comfortably meet. He hasn't broached the question sooner because their return was uncertain—seemed in fact for the present impossible. But he more than intimates that —if you can believe it—their desire to make my acquaint-

ance has had to do with their surmounting difficulties.'

'They're dying to see you?' Miss Gostrey asked.

'Dying. Of course,' said Strether, 'they're the virtuous attachment.' He had already told her about that—had seen her the day after his talk with little Bilham; and they had then threshed out together the bearing of the revelation. She had helped him to put into it the logic in which little Bilham had left it slightly deficient. Strether hadn't pressed him as to the object of the preference so unexpectedly described; feeling in the presence of it, with one of his irrepressible scruples, a delicacy from which he had in the quest of the quite other article worked himself sufficiently free. He had held off, as on a small principle of pride, from permitting his young friend to mention a name; wishing to make with this the great point that Chad's virtuous attachments were none of his business. He had wanted from the first not to think too much of his dignity, but that was no reason for not allowing it any little benefit that might turn up. He had often enough wondered to what degree his interference might pass for interested; so that there was no want of luxury in letting it be seen whenever he could that he didn't interfere. That had of course at the same time not deprived him of the further luxury of much private astonishment; which however he had reduced to some order before communicating his knowledge. When he had done this at last it was with the remark that surprised as Miss Gostrey might, like himself, at first be, she would probably agree with him on reflexion that such an account of the matter did after all fit the confirmed appearances. Nothing certainly, on all the indications, could have been a greater change for him than a virtuous attachment, and since they had been in search of the 'word', as the French called it, of that change, little Bilham's announcement—though so long and so oddly delayed—would serve as well as another. She had assured Strether in fact after a pause that the more she thought of it the more it did serve; and yet her assurance hadn't so weighed with him as that before they parted he hadn't ventured to challenge her sincerity. Didn't she

believe the attachment *was* virtuous?—he had made sure of her again with the aid of that question. The tidings he brought her on this second occasion were moreover such as would help him to make surer still.

She showed at first none the less as only amused. 'You say there are two? An attachment to them both then would, I suppose, almost necessarily be innocent.'

Our friend took the point, but he had his clue. 'Mayn't he be *still* in the stage of not quite knowing which of them, mother or daughter, he likes best?'

She gave it more thought. 'Oh it must be the daughter—at his age.'

'Possibly. Yet what do we know,' Strether asked, 'about hers? She may be old enough.'

'Old enough for what?'

'Why to marry Chad. That may be, you know, what they want. And if Chad wants it too, and little Bilham wants it, and even *we*, at a pinch, could do with it—that is if she doesn't prevent repatriation—why it may be plain sailing yet.'

It was always the case for him in these counsels that each of her remarks, as it came, seemed to drop into a deeper well. He had at all events to wait a moment to hear the slight splash of this one. 'I don't see why if Mr Newsome wants to marry the young lady he hasn't already done it or hasn't been prepared with some statement to you about it. And if he both wants to marry her and is on good terms with them why isn't he "free"?'

Strether, responsively, wondered indeed. 'Perhaps the girl herself doesn't like him.'

'Then why does he speak of them to you as he does?'

Strether's mind echoed the question, but also again met it. 'Perhaps it's with the mother he's on good terms.'

'As against the daughter?'

'Well, if she's trying to persuade the daughter to consent to him, what could make him like the mother more? Only,' Strether threw out, 'why shouldn't the daughter consent to him?'

'Oh,' said Miss Gostrey, 'mayn't it be that every one else isn't quite so struck with him as you?'

'Doesn't regard him you mean as such an "eligible" young man? *Is* that what I've come to?' he audibly and rather gravely sought to know. 'However,' he went on, 'his marriage is what his mother most desires—that is if it will help. And oughtn't *any* marriage to help? They must want him'—he had already worked it out—'to be better off. Almost any girl he may marry will have a direct interest in his taking up his chances. It won't suit *her* at least that he shall miss them.'

Miss Gostrey cast about. 'No—you reason well! But of course on the other hand there's always dear old Woollett itself.'

'Oh yes,' he mused—'there's always dear old Woollett itself.'

She waited a moment. 'The young lady mayn't find herself able to swallow *that* quantity. She may think it's paying too much; she may weigh one thing against another.'

Strether, ever restless in such debates, took a vague turn. 'It will all depend on who she is. That of course—the proved ability to deal with dear old Woollett, since I'm sure she does deal with it—is what makes so strongly for Mamie.'

'Mamie?'

He stopped short, at her tone, before her; then, though seeing that it represented not vagueness, but a momentary embarrassed fullness, he let his exclamations come. 'You surely haven't forgotten about Mamie!'

'No, I haven't forgotten about Mamie,' she smiled. 'There's no doubt whatever that there's ever so much to be said for her. Mamie's *my* girl!' she roundly declared.

Strether resumed for a minute his walk. 'She's really perfectly lovely, you know. Far prettier than any girl I've seen over here yet.'

'That's precisely on what I perhaps most build.' And she mused a moment in her friend's way. 'I should positively like to take her in hand!'

He humoured the fancy, though indeed finally to deprecate it. 'Oh but don't, in your zeal, go over to her! I need you most and can't, you know, be left.'

But she kept it up. 'I wish they'd send her out to me!'

'If they knew you,' he returned, 'they would.'

'Ah but don't they?—after all that, as I've understood you, you've told them about me?'

He had paused before her again, but he continued his course. 'They *will*—before, as you say, I've done.' Then he came out with the point he had wished after all most to make. 'It seems to give away now his game. This is what he has been doing—keeping me along for. He has been waiting for them.'

Miss Gostrey drew in her lips. 'You see a good deal in it!'

'I doubt if I see as much as you. Do you pretend,' he went on, 'that you don't see——?'

'Well, what?'——she pressed him as he paused.

'Why that there must be a lot between them—and that it has been going on from the first; even from before I came.'

She took a minute to answer. 'Who are they then—if it's so grave?'

'It mayn't be grave—it may be gay. But at any rate it's marked. Only I don't know,' Strether had to confess, 'anything about them. Their name for instance was a thing that, after little Bilham's information, I found it a kind of refreshment not to feel obliged to follow up.'

'Oh,' she returned, 'if you think you've got off——!'

Her laugh produced in him a momentary gloom. 'I don't think I've got off. I only think I'm breathing for about five minutes. I dare say I *shall* have, at the best, still to get on.' A look, over it all, passed between them, and the next minute he had come back to good humour. 'I don't meanwhile take the smallest interest in their name.'

'Nor in their nationality?—American, French, English, Polish?'

'I don't care the least little "hang",' he smiled, 'for their nationality. It would be very nice if they're Polish!' he almost immediately added.

'Very nice indeed.' The transition kept up her spirits. 'So you see you do care.'

He did this contention a modified justice. 'I think I should if they *were* Polish. Yes,' he thought—'there might be joy in *that*.'

'Let us then hope for it.' But she came after this nearer to the question. 'If the girl's of the right age of course the mother can't be. I mean for the virtuous attachment. If the girl's twenty—and she can't be less—the mother must be at least forty. So it puts the mother out. *She's* too old for him.'

Strether, arrested again, considered and demurred. 'Do you think so? Do you think any one would be too old for him? *I'm* eighty, and I'm too young. But perhaps the girl,' he continued, '*isn't* twenty. Perhaps she's only ten—but such a little dear that Chad finds himself counting her in as an attraction of the acquaintance. Perhaps she's only five. Perhaps the mother's but five-and-twenty—a charming young widow.'

Miss Gostrey entertained the suggestion. 'She *is* a widow then?'

'I haven't the least idea!' They once more, in spite of this vagueness, exchanged a look—a look that was perhaps the longest yet. It seemed in fact, the next thing, to require to explain itself; which it did as it could. 'I only feel what I've told you—that he has some reason.'

Miss Gostrey's imagination had taken its own flight. 'Perhaps she's *not* a widow.'

Strether seemed to accept the possibility with reserve. Still he accepted it. 'Then that's why the attachment—if it's to her—is virtuous.'

But she looked as if she scarce followed. 'Why is it virtuous if—since she's free—there's nothing to impose on it any condition?'

He laughed at her question. 'Oh I perhaps don't mean as virtuous as *that!* Your idea is that it can be virtuous—in any sense worthy of the name—only if she's *not* free? But what does it become then,' he asked, 'for *her*?'

'Ah that's another matter.' He said nothing for a moment, and she soon went on. 'I dare say you're right, at any rate, about Mr Newsome's little plan. He *has* been trying you—has been reporting on you to these friends.'

Strether meanwhile had had time to think more. 'Then where's his straightness?'

'Well, as we say, it's struggling up, breaking out, asserting itself as it can. We can be on the side, you see, of his straightness. We can help him. But he has made out,' said Miss Gostrey, 'that you'll do.'

'Do for what?'

'Why, for *them*—for *ces dames*. He has watched you, studied you, liked you—and recognised that *they* must. It's a great compliment to you, my dear man; for I'm sure they're particular. You came out for a success. Well,' she gaily declared, 'you're having it!'

He took it from her with momentary patience and then turned abruptly away. It was always convenient to him that there were so many fine things in her room to look at. But the examination of two or three of them appeared soon to have determined a speech that had little to do with them. 'You don't believe in it!'

'In what?'

'In the character of the attachment. In its innocence.'

But she defended herself. 'I don't pretend to know anything about it. Everything's possible. We must see.'

'See?' he echoed with a groan. 'Haven't we seen enough?'

'*I* haven't,' she smiled.

'But do you suppose then little Bilham has lied?'

'You must find out.'

It made him almost turn pale. 'Find out any *more*?'

He had dropped on a sofa for dismay; but she seemed, as she stood over him, to have the last word. 'Wasn't what you came out for to find out *all*?'

BOOK FIFTH

I

THE SUNDAY of the next week was a wonderful day, and Chad Newsome had let his friend know in advance that he had provided for it. There had already been a question of his taking him to see the great Gloriani, who was at home on Sunday afternoons and at whose house, for the most part, fewer bores were to be met than elsewhere; but the project, through some accident, had not had instant effect, and now revived in happier conditions. Chad had made the point that the celebrated sculptor had a queer old garden, for which the weather—spring at last frank and fair—was propitious; and two or three of his other allusions had confirmed for Strether the expectation of something special. He had by this time, for all introductions and adventures, let himself recklessly go, cherishing the sense that whatever the young man showed him he was showing at least himself. He could have wished indeed, so far as this went, that Chad were less of a mere cicerone; for he was not without the impression—now that the vision of his game, his plan, his deep diplomacy, did recurrently assert itself—of his taking refuge from the realities of their intercourse in profusely dispensing, as our friend mentally phrased it, *panem et circenses*. Our friend continued to feel rather smothered in flowers, though he made in his other moments the almost angry inference that this was only because of his odious ascetic suspicion of any form of beauty. He periodically assured himself—for his reactions were sharp—that he shouldn't reach the truth of anything till he had at least got rid of that.

He had known beforehand that Madame de Vionnet and her daughter would probably be on view, an intimation to

that effect having constituted the only reference again made by Chad to his good friends from the south. The effect of Strether's talk about them with Miss Gostrey had been quite to consecrate his reluctance to pry; something in the very air of Chad's silence—judged in the light of that talk —offered it to him as a reserve he could markedly match. It shrouded them about with he scarce knew what, a consideration, a distinction; he was in presence at any rate—so far as it placed him there—of ladies; and the one thing that was definite for him was that they themselves should be, to the extent of his responsibility, in presence of a gentleman. Was it because they were very beautiful, very clever, or even very good—was it for one of these reasons that Chad was, so to speak, nursing his effect? Did he wish to spring them, in the Woollett phrase, with a fuller force—to confound his critic, slight though as yet the criticism, with some form of merit exquisitely incalculable? The most the critic had at all events asked was whether the persons in question were French; and that enquiry had been but a proper comment on the sound of their name. 'Yes. That is no!' had been Chad's reply; but he had immediately added that their English was the most charming in the world, so that if Strether were wanting an excuse for not getting on with them he wouldn't in the least find one. Never in fact had Strether—in the mood into which the place had quickly launched him—felt, for himself, less the need of an excuse. Those he might have found would have been, at the worst, all for the others, the people before him, in whose liberty to be as they were he was aware that he positively rejoiced. His fellow guests were multiplying, and these things, their liberty, their intensity, their variety, their conditions at large, were in fusion in the admirable medium of the scene.

The place itself was a great impression—a small pavilion, clear-faced and sequestered, an effect of polished parquet, of fine white panel and spare sallow gilt, of decoration delicate and rare, in the heart of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and on the edge of a cluster of gardens attached

to old noble houses. Far back from streets and unsuspected by crowds, reached by a long passage and a quiet court, it was as striking to the unprepared mind, he immediately saw, as a treasure dug up; giving him too, more than anything yet, the note of the range of the immeasurable town and sweeping away, as by a last brave brush, his usual landmarks and terms. It was in the garden, a spacious cherished remnant, out to which a dozen persons had already passed, that Chad's host presently met them; while the tall bird-haunted trees, all of a twitter with the spring and the weather, and the high party-walls, on the other side of which grave *hôtels* stood off for privacy, spoke of survival, transmission, association, a strong indifferent persistent order. The day was so soft that the little party had practically adjourned to the open air, but the open air was in such conditions all a chamber of state. Strether had presently the sense of a great convent, a convent of missions, famous for he scarce knew what, a nursery of young priests, of scattered shade, of straight alleys and chapel-bells, that spread its mass in one quarter; he had the sense of names in the air, of ghosts at the windows, of signs and tokens, a whole range of expression, all about him, too thick for prompt discrimination.

This assault of images became for a moment, in the address of the distinguished sculptor, almost formidable: Gloriani showed him, in such perfect confidence, on Chad's introduction of him, a fine worn handsome face, a face that was like an open letter in a foreign tongue. With his genius in his eyes, his manners on his lips, his long career behind him and his honours and rewards all round, the great artist, in the course of a single sustained look and a few words of delight at receiving him, affected our friend as a dazzling prodigy of type. Strether had seen in museums—in the Luxembourg as well as, more reverently, later on, in the New York of the billionaires—the work of his hand; knowing too that after an earlier time in his native Rome he had migrated, in mid-career, to Paris, where, with a personal lustre almost violent, he shone in a constellation: all of

which was more than enough to crown him, for his guest, with the light, with the romance, of glory. Strether, in contact with the element as he had never yet so intimately been, had the consciousness of opening to it, for the happy instant, all the windows of his mind, of letting this rather grey interior drink in for once the sun of a clime not marked in his old geography. He was to remember again repeatedly the medal-like Italian face, in which every line was an artist's own, in which time told only as tone and consecration; and he was to recall in especial, as the penetrating radiance, as the communication of the illustrious spirit itself, the manner in which, while they stood briefly, in welcome and response, face to face, he was held by the sculptor's eyes. He wasn't soon to forget them, was to think of them, all unconscious, unintending, preoccupied though they were, as the source of the deepest intellectual sounding to which he had ever been exposed. He was in fact quite to cherish his vision of it, to play with it in idle hours; only speaking of it to no one and quite aware he couldn't have spoken without appearing to talk nonsense. Was what it had told him or what it had asked him the greater of the mysteries? Was it the most special flare, unequalled, supreme, of the aesthetic torch, lighting that wondrous world for ever, or was it above all the long straight shaft sunk by a personal acuteness that life had seasoned to steel? Nothing on earth could have been stranger and no one doubtless more surprised than the artist himself, but it was for all the world to Strether just then as if in the matter of his accepted duty he had positively been on trial. The deep human expertness in Gloriani's charming smile—oh the terrible life behind it!—was flashed upon him as a test of his stuff.

Chad meanwhile, after having easily named his companion, had still more easily turned away and was already greeting other persons present. He was as easy, clever Chad, with the great artist as with his obscure compatriot, and as easy with every one else as with either: this fell into its place for Strether and made almost a new light, giving

him, as a concatenation, something more he could enjoy. He liked Gloriani, but should never see him again; of that he was sufficiently sure. Chad accordingly, who was wonderful with both of them, was a kind of link for hopeless fancy, an implication of possibilities—oh if everything had been different! Strether noted at all events that he was thus on terms with illustrious spirits, and also that—yes, distinctly—he hadn't in the least swaggered about it. Our friend hadn't come there only for this figure of Abel Newsome's son, but that presence threatened to affect the observant mind as positively central. Gloriani indeed, remembering something and excusing himself, pursued Chad to speak to him, and Strether was left musing on many things. One of them was the question of whether, since he had been tested, he had passed. Did the artist drop him from having made out that he wouldn't do? He really felt just to-day that he might do better than usual. Hadn't he done well enough, so far as that went, in being exactly so dazzled? and in not having too, as he almost believed, wholly hidden from his host that he felt the latter's plummet? Suddenly, across the garden, he saw little Bilham approach, and it was a part of the fit that was on him that as their eyes met he guessed also *his* knowledge. If he had said to him on the instant what was uppermost he would have said: '*Have* I passed?—for of course I know one has to pass here.' Little Bilham would have reassured him, have told him that he exaggerated, and have adduced happily enough the argument of little Bilham's own very presence; which, in truth, he could see, was as easy a one as Gloriani's own or as Chad's. He himself would perhaps then after a while cease to be frightened, would get the point of view for some of the faces—types tremendously alien, alien to Woollett—that he had already begun to take in. Who were they all, the dispersed groups and couples, the ladies even more unlike those of Woollett than the gentlemen?—this was the inquiry that, when his young friend had greeted him, he did find himself making.

'Oh they're every one—all sorts and sizes; of course I

mean within limits, though limits down perhaps rather more than limits up. There are always artists—he's beautiful and inimitable to the *cher confrère*; and then *gros bonnets* of many kinds—ambassadors, cabinet ministers, bankers, generals, what do I know? even Jews. Above all always some awfully nice women—and not too many; sometimes an actress, an artist, a great performer—but only when they're not monsters; and in particular the right *femmes du monde*. You can fancy his history on that side —I believe it's fabulous: they *never* give him up. Yet he keeps them down: no one knows how he manages; it's too beautiful and bland. Never too many—and a mighty good thing too; just a perfect choice. But there are not in any way many bores; it has always been so; he has some secret. It's extraordinary. And you don't find it out. He's the same to every one. He doesn't ask questions.'

'Ah doesn't he?' Strether laughed.

Bilham met it with all his candour. 'How then should *I* be here?'

'Oh for what you tell me. You're part of the perfect choice.'

Well, the young man took in the scene. 'It seems rather good to-day.'

Strether followed the direction of his eyes. 'Are they all, this time, *femmes du monde*?'

Little Bilham showed his competence. 'Pretty well.'

This was a category our friend had a feeling for; a light, romantic and mysterious, on the feminine element, in which he enjoyed for a little watching it. 'Are there any Poles?'

His companion considered. 'I think I make out a "Portuguee". But I've seen Turks.'

Strether wondered, desiring justice. 'They seem—all the women—very harmonious.'

'Oh in closer quarters they come out!' And then, while Strether was aware of fearing closer quarters, though giving himself again to the harmonies, 'Well,' little Bilham went on, 'it *is* at the worst rather good, you know. If you like it, you feel it, this way, that shows you're not in the

least out. But you always know things,' he handsomely added, 'immediately.'

Strether liked it and felt it only too much; so 'I say, don't lay traps for me!' he rather helplessly murmured.

'Well,' his companion returned, 'he's wonderfully kind to *us*.'

'To us Americans you mean?'

'Oh no—he doesn't know anything about *that*. That's half the battle here—that you can never hear politics. We don't talk them. I mean to poor young wretches of all sorts. And yet it's always as charming as this; it's as if, by something in the air, our squalor didn't show. It puts us all back —into the last century.'

'I'm afraid,' Strether said, amused, 'that it puts me rather forward: oh ever so far!'

'Into the next? But isn't that only,' little Bilham asked, 'because you're really of the century before?'

'The century before the last? Thank you!' Strether laughed. 'If I ask you about some of the ladies it can't be then that I may hope, as such a specimen of the rococo, to please them.'

'On the contrary they adore—we all adore here—the rococo, and where is there a better setting for it than the whole thing, the pavilion and the garden, together? There are lots of people with collections,' little Bilham smiled as he glanced round. 'You'll be secured!'

It made Strether for a moment give himself again to contemplation. There were faces he scarce knew what to make of. Were they charming or were they only strange? He mightn't talk politics, yet he suspected a Pole or two. The upshot was the question at the back of his head from the moment his friend had joined him. 'Have Madame de Vionnet and her daughter arrived?'

'I haven't seen them yet, but Miss Gostrey has come. She's in the pavilion looking at objects. One can see *she's* a collector,' little Bilham added without offence.

'Oh yes, she's a collector, and I knew she was to come. Is Madame de Vionnet a collector?' Strether went on.

'Rather, I believe; almost celebrated.' The young man met, on it, a little, his friend's eyes. 'I happen to know—from Chad, whom I saw last night—that they've come back; but only yesterday. He wasn't sure—up to the last. This, accordingly,' little Bilham went on, 'will be— if they *are* here—their first appearance after their return.'

Strether, very quickly, turned these things over. 'Chad told you last night? To me, on our way here, he said nothing about it.'

'But did you ask him?'

Strether did him the justice. 'I dare say not.'

'Well,' said little Bilham, 'you're not a person to whom it's easy to tell things you don't want to know. Though it *is* easy, I admit—it's quite beautiful,' he benevolently added, 'when you do want to.'

Strether looked at him with an indulgence that matched his intelligence. 'Is that the deep reasoning on which—about these ladies—you've been yourself so silent?'

Little Bilham considered the depth of the reasoning. 'I haven't been silent. I spoke of them to you the other day, the day we sat together after Chad's tea-party.'

Strether came round to it. 'They then are the virtuous attachment?'

'I can only tell you that it's what they pass for. But isn't that enough? What more than a vain appearance does the wisest of us know? I commend you,' the young man declared with a pleasant emphasis, 'the vain appearance.'

Strether looked more widely round, and what he saw, from face to face, deepened the effect of his young friend's words. 'Is it so good?'

'Magnificent.'

Strether had a pause. 'The husband's dead?'

'Dear no. Alive.'

'Oh!' said Strether. After which, as his companion laughed: 'How then can it be so good?'

'You'll see for yourself. One does see.'

'Chad's in love with the daughter?'

'That's what I mean.'

Strether wondered. 'Then where's the difficulty?'

'Why, aren't you and I—with our grander bolder ideas?'

'Oh mine—!' Strether said rather strangely. But then as if to attenuate: 'You mean they won't hear of Woollett?'

Little Bilham smiled. 'Isn't that just what you must see about?'

It had brought them, as she caught the last words, into relation with Miss Barrace, whom Strether had already observed—as he had never before seen a lady at a party—moving about alone. Coming within sound of them she had already spoken, and she took again, through her long-handled glass, all her amused and amusing possession. 'How much, poor Mr Strether, you seem to have to see about! But you can't say,' she gaily declared, 'that I don't do what I can to help you. Mr Waymarsh is placed. I've left him in the house with Miss Gostrey.'

'The way,' little Bilham exclaimed, 'Mr Strether gets the ladies to work for him! He's just preparing to draw in another; to pounce—don't you see him?—on Madame de Vionnet.'

'Madame de Vionnet? Oh, oh, oh!' Miss Barrace cried in a wonderful crescendo. There was more in it, our friend made out, than met the ear. Was it after all a joke that he should be serious about anything? He envied Miss Barrace at any rate her power of not being. She seemed, with little cries and protests and quick recognitions, movements like the darts of some fine high-feathered free-pecking bird, to stand before life as before some full shop-window. You could fairly hear, as she selected and pointed, the tap of her tortoise-shell against the glass. 'It's certain that we do need seeing about; only I'm glad it's not I who have to do it. One does, no doubt, begin that way; then suddenly one finds that one has given it up. It's too much, it's too difficult. You're wonderful, you people,' she continued to Strether, 'for not feeling those things—by which I mean impossibilities. You never feel them. You face them with a fortitude that makes it a lesson to watch you.'

'Ah but'—little Bilham put it with discouragement—

'what do we achieve after all? We see about you and report —when we even go so far as reporting. But nothing's done.'

'Oh you, Mr Bilham,' she replied as with an impatient rap on the glass, 'you're not worth sixpence! You come over to convert the savages—for I know you verily did, I remember you—and the savages simply convert *you*.'

'Not even!' the young man woefully confessed: 'they haven't gone through that form. They've simply—the cannibals!—eaten me; converted me if you like, but converted me into food. I'm but the bleached bones of a Christian.'

'Well then there we are! Only'—and Miss Barrace appealed again to Strether—'don't let it discourage you. You'll break down soon enough, but you'll meanwhile have had your moments. *Il faut en avoir*. I always like to see you while you last. And I'll tell you who *will* last.'

'Waymarsh?'—he had already taken her up.

She laughed out as at the alarm of it. 'He'll resist even Miss Gostrey: so grand is it not to understand. He's wonderful.'

'He is indeed,' Strether conceded. 'He wouldn't tell me of this affair—only said he had an engagement; but with such a gloom, you must let me insist, as if it had been an engagement to be hanged. Then silently and secretly he turns up here with you. Do you call *that* "lasting"?'

'Oh I hope it's lasting!' Miss Barrace said. 'But he only, at the best, bears with me. He doesn't understand—not one little scrap. He's delightful. He's wonderful,' she repeated.

'Michelangelesque!'—little Bilham completed her meaning. 'He *is* a success. Moses, on the ceiling, brought down to the floor; overwhelming, colossal, but somehow portable.'

'Certainly, if you mean by portable,' she returned, 'looking so well in one's carriage. He's too funny beside me in his corner; he looks like somebody, somebody foreign and famous, *en exil*; so that people wonder—it's very amusing —whom I'm taking about. I show him Paris, show him everything, and he never turns a hair. He's like the Indian chief one reads about, who, when he comes up to Washington to see the Great Father, stands wrapt in his blanket

and gives no sign. *I* might be the Great Father from the way he takes everything.' She was delighted at this hit of her identity with that personage—it fitted so her character; she declared it was the title she meant henceforth to adopt. 'And the way he sits, too, in the corner of my room, only looking at my visitors very hard and as if he wanted to start something! They wonder what he does want to start. But he's wonderful,' Miss Barrace once more insisted. 'He has never started anything yet.'

It presented him none the less, in truth, to her actual friends, who looked at each other in intelligence, with frank amusement on Bilham's part and a shade of sadness on Strether's. Strether's sadness sprang—for the image had its grandeur—from his thinking how little he himself was wrapt in his blanket, how little, in marble halls, all too oblivious of the Great Father, he resembled a really majestic aboriginal. But he had also another reflexion. 'You've all of you here so much visual sense that you've somehow all "run" to it. There are moments when it strikes one that you haven't any other.'

'Any moral,' little Bilham explained, watching serenely, across the garden, the several *femmes du monde*. 'But Miss Barrace has a moral distinction,' he kindly continued; speaking as if for Strether's benefit not less than for her own.

'*Have* you?' Strether, scarce knowing what he was about, asked of her almost eagerly.

'Oh not a distinction'—she was mightily amused at his tone—'Mr Bilham's too good. But I think I may say a sufficiency. Yes, a sufficiency. Have you supposed strange things of me?'—and she fixed him again, through all her tortoise-shell, with the droll interest of it. 'You *are* all indeed wonderful. I should awfully disappoint you. I do take my stand on my sufficiency. But I know, I confess,' she went on, 'strange people. I don't know how it happens; I don't do it on purpose; it seems to be my doom—as if I were always one of their habits: it's wonderful! I dare say, moreover,' she pursued with an interested gravity, 'that I

do, that we all do here, run too much to mere eye. But how can it be helped? We're all looking at each other—and in the light of Paris one sees what things resemble. That's what the light of Paris seems always to show. It's the fault of the light of Paris—dear old light!'

'Dear old Paris!' little Bilham echoed.

'Everything, every one shows,' Miss Barrace went on.

'But for what they really are?' Strether asked.

'Oh, I like your Boston "reallys"! But sometimes—yes.'

'Dear old Paris then!' Strether resignedly sighed while for a moment they looked at each other. Then he broke out: 'Does Madame de Vionnet do that? I mean really show for what she is?'

Her answer was prompt. 'She's charming. She's perfect.'

'Then why did you a minute ago say, "Oh, oh, oh!" at her name?'

She easily remembered. 'Why, just because——! She's wonderful.'

'Ah she too?'—Strether had almost a groan.

But Miss Barrace had meanwhile perceived relief. 'Why not put your question straight to the person who can answer it best?'

'No,' said little Bilham; 'don't put any question; wait, rather—it will be much more fun—to judge for yourself. He has come to take you to her.'

II

ON WHICH Strether saw that Chad was again at hand, and he afterwards scarce knew, absurd as it may seem, what had then quickly occurred. The moment concerned him, he felt, more deeply than he could have explained, and he had a subsequent passage of speculation as to whether, on walking off with Chad, he hadn't looked either pale or red. The only thing he was clear about was that, luckily, nothing

indiscreet had in fact been said, and that Chad himself was more than ever, in Miss Barrace's great sense, wonderful. It was one of the connexions—though really why it should be, after all, was none so apparent—in which the whole change in him came out as most striking. Strether recalled as they approached the house that he had impressed him that first night as knowing how to enter a box. Well, he impressed him scarce less now as knowing how to make a presentation. It did something for Strether's own quality —marked it as estimated; so that our poor friend, conscious and passive, really seemed to feel himself quite handed over and delivered; absolutely, as he would have said, made a present of, given away. As they reached the house a young woman, about to come forth, appeared, unaccompanied, on the steps; at the exchange with whom of a word on Chad's part Strether immediately perceived that, obligingly, kindly, she was there to meet them. Chad had left her in the house, but she had afterwards come half way and then the next moment had joined them in the garden. Her air of youth, for Strether, was at first almost disconcerting, while his second impression was, not less sharply, a degree of relief at there not having just been, with the others, any freedom used about her. It was upon him at a touch that she was no subject for that, and meanwhile, on Chad's introducing him, she had spoken to him, very simply and gently, in an English clearly of the easiest to her, yet unlike any other he had ever heard. It wasn't as if she tried; nothing, he could see after they had been a few minutes together, was as if she tried; but her speech, charming correct and odd, was like a precaution against her passing for a Pole. There were precautions, he seemed indeed to see, only when there were really dangers.

Later on he was to feel many more of them, but by that time he was to feel other things besides. She was dressed in black, but in black that struck him as light and transparent; she was exceedingly fair, and, though she was as markedly slim, her face had a roundness, with eyes far apart and a little strange. Her smile was natural and dim; her hat not

extravagant; he had only perhaps a sense of the clink, beneath her fine black sleeves, of more gold bracelets and bangles then he had ever seen a lady wear. Chad was excellently free and light about their encounter; it was one of the occasions on which Strether most wished he himself might have arrived at such ease and such humour: 'Here you are then, face to face at last; you're made for each other—*vous allez voir*; and I bless your union.' It was indeed, after he had gone off, as if he had been partly serious too. This latter motion had been determined by an inquiry from him about "Jeanne"; to which her mother had replied that she was probably still in the house with Miss Gostrey, to whom she had lately committed her. 'Ah but you know,' the young man had rejoined, 'he must see her'; with which, while Strether pricked up his ears, he had started as if to bring her, leaving the other objects of his interest together. Strether wondered to find Miss Gostrey already involved, feeling that he missed a link; but feeling also, with small delay, how much he should like to talk with her of Madame de Vionnet on this basis of evidence.

The evidence as yet in truth was meagre; which, for that matter, was perhaps a little why his expectation had had a drop. There was somehow not quite a wealth in her; and a wealth was all that, in his simplicity, he had definitely prefigured. Still, it was too much to be sure already that there was but a poverty. They moved away from the house, and, with eyes on a bench at some distance, he proposed that they should sit down. 'I've heard a great deal about you,' she said as they went; but he had an answer to it that made her stop short. 'Well, about *you*, Madame de Vionnet, I've heard, I'm bound to say, almost nothing'—those struck him as the only words he himself could utter with any lucidity; conscious as he was, and as with more reason, of the determination to be in respect to the rest of his business perfectly plain and go perfectly straight. It hadn't at any rate been in the least his idea to spy on Chad's proper freedom. It was possibly, however, at this very instant and under the impression of Madame de Vionnet's pause, that

going straight began to announce itself as a matter for care. She had only after all to smile at him ever so gently in order to make him ask himself if he weren't already going crooked. It might be going crooked to find it of a sudden just only clear that she intended very definitely to be what he would have called nice to him. This was what passed between them while, for another instant, they stood still; he couldn't at least remember afterwards what else it might have been. The thing indeed really unmistakable was that it rolled over him as a wave that he had been, in conditions incalculable and unimaginable, a subject of discussion. He had been, on some ground that concerned her, answered for; which gave her an advantage he should never be able to match.

'Hasn't Miss Gostrey,' she asked, 'said a good word for me?'

What had struck him first was the way he was bracketed with that lady; and he wondered what account Chad would have given of their acquaintance. Something not as yet traceable, at all events, had obviously happened. 'I didn't even know of her knowing you.'

'Well, now she'll tell you all. I'm so glad you're in relation with her.'

This was one of the things—the 'all' Miss Gostrey would now tell him—that, with every deference to present preoccupation, was uppermost for Strether after they had taken their seat. One of the others was, at the end of five minutes, that she—oh, incontestably, yes—*differed* less; differed, that is, scarcely at all—well, superficially speaking, from Mrs Newsome or even from Mrs Pocock. She was ever so much younger than the one and not so young as the other; but what *was* there in her, if anything, that would have made it impossible he should meet her at Woollett? And wherein was her talk during their moments on the bench together not the same as would have been found adequate for a Woollett garden-party?—unless perhaps truly in not being quite so bright. She observed to him that Mr Newsome had, to her knowledge, taken extra-

ordinary pleasure in his visit; but there was no good lady at Woollett who wouldn't have been at least up to that. Was there in Chad, by chance, after all, deep down, a principle of aboriginal loyalty that had made him, for sentimental ends, attach himself to elements, happily encountered, that would remind him most of the old air and the old soil? Why accordingly be in a flutter—Strether could even put it that way—about this unfamiliar phenomenon of the *femme du monde*? On these terms Mrs Newsome herself was as much of one. Little Bilham verily had testified that they came out, the ladies of the type, in close quarters; but it was just in these quarters—now comparatively close—that he felt Madame de Vionnet's common humanity. She did come out, and certainly to his relief, but she came out as the usual thing. There might be motives behind, but so could there often be even at Woollett. The only thing was that if she showed him she wished to like him—as the motives behind might conceivably prompt—it would possibly have been more thrilling for him that she should have shown as more vividly alien. Ah she was neither Turk nor Pole!—which would be indeed flat once more for Mrs Newsome and Mrs Pocock. A lady and two gentlemen had meanwhile, however, approached their bench, and this accident stayed for the time further developments.

They presently addressed his companion, the brilliant strangers; she rose to speak to them, and Strether noted how the escorted lady, though mature and by no means beautiful, had more of the bold high look, the range of expensive reference, that he had, as might have been said, made his plans for. Madame de Vionnet greeted her as 'Duchesse' and was greeted in turn, while talk started in French, as '*Ma toute-belle*'; little facts that had their due, their vivid interest for Strether. Madame de Vionnet didn't, none the less, introduce him—a note he was conscious of as false to the Woollett scale and the Woollett humanity; though it didn't prevent the Duchess, who struck him as confident and free, very much what he had obscurely supposed duchesses, from looking at him as straight and as

hard—for it *was* hard—as if she would have liked, all the same, to know him. 'Oh yes, my dear, it's all right, it's *me*; and who are *you*, with your interesting wrinkles and your most effective (is it the handsomest, is it the ugliest?) of noses?'—some such loose handful of bright flowers she seemed, fragrantly enough, to fling at him. Strether almost wondered—at such a pace was he going—if some divination of the influence of either party were what determined Madame de Vionnet's abstention. One of the gentlemen, in any case, succeeded in placing himself in close relation with our friend's companion; a gentleman rather stout and importantly short, in a hat with a wonderful wide curl to its brim and a frock coat buttoned with an effect of superlative decision. His French had quickly turned to equal English, and it occurred to Strether that he might well be one of the ambassadors. His design was evidently to assert a claim to Madame de Vionnet's undivided countenance, and he made it good in the course of a minute—led her away with a trick of three words; a trick played with a social art of which Strether, looking after them as the four, whose backs were now all turned, moved off, felt himself no master.

He sank again upon his bench and, while his eyes followed the party, reflected, as he had done before, on Chad's strange communities. He sat there alone for five minutes, with plenty to think of; above all with his sense of having suddenly been dropped by a charming woman overlaid now by other impressions and in fact quite cleared and indifferent. He hadn't yet had so quiet a surrender; he didn't in the least care if nobody spoke to him more. He might have been, by his attitude, in for something of a match so broad that the want of ceremony with which he had just been used could fall into its place as but a minor incident of the procession. Besides, there would be incidents enough, as he felt when this term of contemplation was closed by the reappearance of little Bilham, who stood before him a moment with a suggestive 'Well?' in which he saw himself reflected as disorganised, as possibly floored. He replied

with a 'Well!' intended to show that he wasn't floored in the least. No indeed; he gave it out, as the young man sat down beside him, that if, at the worst, he had been overturned at all, he had been overturned into the upper air, the sublimer element with which he had an affinity and in which he might be trusted a while to float. It wasn't a descent to earth to say after an instant in sustained response to the reference: 'You're quite sure her husband's living?'

'Oh dear, yes.'

'Ah then——!'

'Ah then what?'

Strether had after all to think. 'Well, I'm sorry for them.' But it didn't for the moment matter more than that. He assured his young friend he was quite content. They wouldn't stir; were all right as they were. He didn't want to be introduced; had been introduced already about as far as he could go. He had seen, moreover, an immensity; liked Gloriani, who, as Miss Barrace kept saying, was wonderful; had made out, he was sure, the half-dozen other men who were distinguished, the artists, the critics and oh the great dramatist—*him* it was easy to spot; but wanted—no, thanks, really—to talk with none of them; having nothing at all to say and finding it would do beautifully as it was; do beautifully because what it was—well, was just simply too late. And when after this little Bilham, submissive and responsive, but with an eye to the consolation nearest, easily threw off some 'Better late than never!' all he got in return for it was a sharp 'Better early than late!' This note indeed the next thing overflowed for Strether into a quiet stream of demonstration that as soon as he had let himself go he felt as the real relief. It had consciously gathered to a head, but the reservoir had filled sooner than he knew, and his companion's touch was to make the waters spread. There were some things that had to come in time if they were to come at all. If they didn't come in time they were lost for ever. It was the general sense of them that had overwhelmed him with its long slow rush.

'It's not too late for *you*, on any side, and you don't strike

me as in danger of missing the train; besides which people can be in general pretty well trusted, of course—with the clock of their freedom ticking as loud as it seems to do here—to keep an eye on the fleeting hour. All the same don't forget that you're young—blessedly young; be glad of it on the contrary and live up to it. Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what *have* you had? This place and these impressions—mild as you may find them to wind a man up so; all my impressions of Chad and of people I've seen at *his* place—well, have had their abundant message for me, have just dropped *that* into my mind. I see it now. I haven't done so enough before—and now I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see. Oh, I *do* see, at least; and more than you'd believe or I can express. It's too late. And it's as if the train had fairly waited at the station for me without my having had the gumption to know it was there. Now I hear its faint receding whistle miles and miles down the line. What one loses one loses; make no mistake about that. The affair—I mean the affair of life—couldn't, no doubt, have been different for me; for it's at the best a tin mould, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one's consciousness is poured—so that one "takes" the form, as the great cook says, and is more or less compactly held by it; one lives in fine as one can. Still, one has the illusion of freedom; therefore don't be, like me, without the memory of that illusion. I was either, at the right time, too stupid or too intelligent to have it; I don't quite know which. Of course at present I'm a case of reaction against the mistake; and the voice of reaction should, no doubt, always be taken with an allowance. But that doesn't affect the point that the right time is now yours. The right time is *any* time that one is still so lucky as to have. You've plenty; that's the great thing; you're, as I say, damn you, so happily and hatefully young. Don't at any rate miss things out of stupidity. Of course I don't

take you for a fool, or I shouldn't be addressing you thus awfully. Do what you like so long as you don't make *my* mistake. For it was a mistake. Live!'... Slowly and sociably, with full pauses and straight dashes, Strether had so delivered himself; holding little Bilham from step to step deeply and gravely attentive. The end of all was that the young man had turned quite solemn, and that this was a contradiction of the innocent gaiety the speaker had wished to promote. He watched for a moment the consequence of his words, and then, laying a hand on his listener's knee and as if to end with the proper joke: 'And now for the eye I shall keep on you!'

'Oh but I don't know that I want to be, at your age, too different from you!'

'Ah prepare while you're about it,' said Strether, 'to be more amusing.'

Little Bilham continued to think, but at last had a smile. 'Well, you *are* amusing—to *me*.'

'*Impayable*, as you say, no doubt. But what am I to myself?' Strether had risen with this, giving his attention now to an encounter that, in the middle of the garden, was in the act of taking place between their host and the lady at whose side Madame de Vionnet had quitted him. This lady, who appeared within a few minutes to have left her friends, awaited Gloriani's eager approach with words on her lips that Strether couldn't catch, but of which her interesting, witty face seemed to give him the echo. He was sure she was prompt and fine, but also that she had met her match, and he liked—in the light of what he was quite sure was the Duchess's latent insolence—the good humour with which the great artist asserted equal resources. Were they, this pair, of the 'great world'?—and was he himself, for the moment and thus related to them by his observation, *in* it? Then there was something in the great world covertly tigerish, which came to him across the lawn and in the charming air, as a waft from the jungle. Yet it made him admire most of the two, made him envy, the glossy male tiger, magnificently marked. These absurdities of the stirred

sense, fruits of suggestion ripening on the instant, were all reflected in his next words to little Bilham. 'I know—if we talk of that—whom *I* should enjoy being like!'

Little Bilham followed his eyes; but then as with a shade of knowing surprise: 'Gloriani?'

Our friend had in fact already hesitated, though not on the hint of his companion's doubt, in which there were depths of critical reserve. He had just made out, in the now full picture, something and somebody else; another impression had been superimposed. A young girl in a white dress and a softly plumed white hat had suddenly come into view, and what was presently clear was that her course was toward them. What was clearer still was that the handsome young man at her side was Chad Newsome, and what was clearest of all was that she was therefore Mademoiselle de Vionnet, that she was unmistakably pretty—bright gentle shy happy wonderful—and that Chad now, with a consummate calculation of effect, was about to present her to his old friend's vision. What was clearest of all indeed was something much more than this, something at the single stroke of which—and wasn't it simply juxtaposition?—all vagueness vanished. It was the click of a spring—he saw the truth. He had by this time also met Chad's look; there was more of it in that; and the truth, accordingly, so far as Bilham's inquiry was concerned, had thrust in the answer. 'Oh, Chad!'—it was that rare youth he should have enjoyed being 'like'. The virtuous attachment would be all there before him; the virtuous attachment would be in the very act of appeal for his blessing; Jeanne de Vionnet, this charming creature, would be—exquisitely, intensely now—the object of it. Chad brought her straight up to him, and Chad was, oh yes, at this moment—for the glory of Woollett or whatever—better still even than Gloriani. He had plucked this blossom; he had kept it overnight in water; and at last as he held it up to wonder he did enjoy his effect. That was why Strether had felt at first the breath of calculation—and why moreover, as he now knew, his look at the girl would be, for the young man, a sign of the latter's success

What young man had ever paraded about that way, without a reason, a maiden in her flower? And there was nothing in his reason at present obscure. Her type sufficiently told of it—they wouldn't, they couldn't, want her to go to Woollett. Poor Woollett, and what it might miss!—though brave Chad indeed too, and what it might gain! Brave Chad however had just excellently spoken. 'This is a good little friend of mine who knows all about you and has, moreover, a message for you. And this, my dear'—he had turned to the child herself—'is the best man in the world, who has it in his power to do a great deal for us and whom I want you to like and revere as nearly as possible as much as I do.'

She stood there quite pink, a little frightened, prettier and prettier and not a bit like her mother. There was in this last particular no resemblance but that of youth to youth; and here was in fact suddenly Strether's sharpest impression. It went wondering, dazed, embarrassed, back to the woman he had just been talking with; it was revelation in the light of which he already saw she would become more interesting. So slim and fresh and fair, she had yet put forth this perfection; so that for really believing it of her, for seeing her to any such developed degree as a mother, comparison would be urgent. Well, what was it now but fairly thrust upon him? 'Mamma wishes me to tell you before we go,' the girl said, 'that she hopes very much you'll come to see us very soon. She has something important to say to you.'

'She quite reproaches herself,' Chad helpfully explained: 'you were interesting her so much when she accidentally suffered you to be interrupted.'

'Ah don't mention it!' Strether murmured, looking kindly from one to the other and wondering at many things.

'And I'm to ask you for myself,' Jeanne continued with her hands clasped together as if in some small learnt prayer —'I'm to ask you for myself if you won't positively come.'

'Leave it to me, dear—I'll take care of it!' Chad genially declared in answer to this, while Strether himself almost

held his breath. What was in the girl was indeed too soft, too unknown for direct dealing; so that one could only gaze at it as at a picture, quite staying one's own hand. But with Chad he was now on ground—Chad he could meet; so pleasant a confidence in that and in everything did the young man freely exhale. There was the whole of a story in his tone to his companion, and he spoke indeed as if already of the family. It made Strether guess the more quickly what it might be about which Madame de Vionnet was so urgent. Having seen him then she had found him easy; she wished to have it out with him that some way for the young people must be discovered, some way that would not impose as a condition the transplantation of her daughter. He already saw himself discussing with this lady the attractions of Woollett as a residence for Chad's companion. Was that youth going now to trust her with the affair—so that it would be after all with one of his 'lady-friends' that his mother's missionary should be condemned to deal? It was quite as if for an instant the two men looked at each other on this question. But there was no mistaking at last Chad's pride in the display of such a connexion. This was what had made him so carry himself while, three minutes before, he was bringing it into view; what had caused his friend, first catching sight of him, to be so struck with his air. It was, in a word, just when he thus finally felt Chad putting things straight off on him that he envied him, as he had mentioned to little Bilham, most. The whole exhibition however was but a matter of three or four minutes, and the author of it had soon explained that, as Madame de Vionnet was immediately going 'on', this could be for Jeanne but a snatch. They would all meet again soon, and Strether was meanwhile to stay and amuse himself—'I'll pick you up again in plenty of time.' He took the girl off as he had brought her, and Strether, with the faint sweet foreignness of her 'Au revoir, monsieur!' in his ears as a note almost unprecedented, watched them recede side by side and felt now, once more, her companion's relation to her got an accent from it. They disappeared

among the others and apparently into the house; whereupon our friend turned round to give out to little Bilham the conviction of which he was full. But there was no little Bilham any more; little Bilham had within the few moments, for reasons of his own, proceeded further: a circumstance by which, in its order, Strether was also sensibly affected.

III

CHAD WAS not in fact on this occasion to keep his promise of coming back; but Miss Gostrey had soon presented herself with an explanation of his failure. There had been reasons at the last for his going off with *ces dames*; and he had asked her with much instance to come out and take charge of their friend. She did so, Strether felt as she took her place beside him, in a manner that left nothing to desire. He had dropped back on his bench, alone again for a time, and the more conscious for little Bilham's defection of his unexpressed thought; in respect to which, however, this next converser was a still more capacious vessel. 'It's the child!' he had exclaimed to her almost as soon as she appeared; and though her direct response was for some time delayed he could feel in her meanwhile the working of this truth. It might have been simply, as she waited, that they were now in presence altogether of truth spreading like a flood and not for the moment to be offered her in the mere cupful; inasmuch as who should *ces dames* prove to be but persons about whom—once thus face to face with them—she found she might from the first have told him almost everything? This would have freely come had he taken the simple precaution of giving her their name. There could be no better example—and she appeared to note it with high amusement—than the way, making things out already so much for himself, if he was at last throwing precautions to the winds. They were neither more nor less,

she and the child's mother, than old school-friends—friends who had scarcely met for years but whom this unlooked-for chance had brought together with a rush. It was a relief, Miss Gostrey hinted, to feel herself no longer groping; she was unaccustomed to grope and as a general thing, he might well have seen, made straight enough for her clue. With the one she had now picked up in her hands there need be at least no waste of wonder. 'She's coming to see me—that's for *you*,' Strether's counsellor continued; 'but I don't require it to know where I am.'

The waste of wonder might be proscribed; but Strether, characteristically, was even by this time in the immensity of space. 'By which you mean that you know where *she* is?'

She just hesitated. 'I mean that if she comes to see me I shall—now that I've pulled myself round a bit after the shock—not be at home.'

Strether hung poised. 'You call it—your recognition—a shock?'

She gave one of her rare flickers of impatience. 'It was a surprise, an emotion. Don't be so literal. I wash my hands of her.'

Poor Strether's face lengthened. 'She's impossible——?'

'She's even more charming than I remembered her.'

'Then what's the matter?'

She had to think how to put it. 'Well, *I'm* impossible. It's impossible. Everything's impossible.'

He looked at her an instant. 'I see where you're coming out. Everything's possible.' Their eyes had on it in fact an exchange of some duration; after which he pursued: 'Isn't it that beautiful child?' Then as she still said nothing: 'Why don't you mean to receive her?'

Her answer in an instant rang clear. 'Because I wish to keep out of the business.'

It provoked in him a weak wail. 'You're going to abandon me *now*?'

'No, I'm only going to abandon *her*. She'll want me to help her with you. And I won't.'

'You'll only help me with her? Well, then——!'

Most of the persons previously gathered had, in the interest of tea, passed into the house, and they had the gardens mainly to themselves. The shadows were long, the last call of the birds, who had made a home of their own in the noble interspaced quarter, sounded from the high trees in the other gardens as well, those of the old convent and of the old *hôtels*; it was as if our friends had waited for the full charm to come out. Strether's impressions were still present; it was as if something had happened that 'nailed' them, made them more intense; but he was to ask himself soon afterwards, that evening, what really *had* happened—conscious as he could after all remain that for a gentleman taken, and taken for the first time, into the 'great world', the world of ambassadors and duchesses, the items made a meagre total. It was nothing new to him, however, as we know, that a man might have—at all events such a man as he—an amount of experience out of any proportion to his adventures; so that, though it was doubtless no great adventure to sit on there with Miss Gostrey and hear about Madame de Vionnet, the hour, the picture, the immediate, the recent, the possible—as well as the communication itself, not a note of which failed to reverberate —only gave the moments more of the taste of history.

It was history, to begin with, that Jeanne's mother had been three-and-twenty years before, at Geneva, schoolmate and good girl-friend to Maria Gostrey, who had moreover enjoyed since then, though interruptedly and above all with a long recent drop, other glimpses of her. Twenty-three years put them both on, no doubt; and Madame de Vionnet—though she had married straight after school—couldn't be to-day an hour less than thirty-eight. This made her ten years older than Chad—though ten years, also, if Strether liked, older than she looked; the least, at any rate, that a prospective mother-in-law could be expected to do with. She would be of all mothers-in-law the most charming; unless indeed, through some perversity as yet insupposable, she should utterly belie herself in that relation. There was none surely in which, as Maria remembered her, she mustn't

be charming; and this frankly in spite of the stigma of failure in the tie where failure always most showed. It was no test there—when indeed *was* it a test there?—for Monsieur de Vionnet had been a brute. She had lived for years apart from him—which was of course always a horrid position; but Miss Gostrey's impression of the matter had been that she could scarce have made a better thing of it had she done it on purpose to show she was amiable. She was so amiable that nobody had had a word to say; which was luckily not the case for her husband. He was so impossible that she had the advantage of all her merits.

It was still history for Strether that the Comte de Vionnet—it being also history that the lady in question was a Countess—should now, under Miss Gostrey's sharp touch, rise before him as a high distinguished polished impertinent reprobate, the product of a mysterious order; it was history, further, that the charming girl so freely sketched by his companion should have been married out of hand by a mother, another figure of striking outline, full of dark personal motive; it was perhaps history most of all that this company was, as a matter of course, governed by such considerations as put divorce out of the question. '*Ces gens-là* don't divorce, you know, any more than they emigrate or abjure—they think it impious and vulgar'; a fact in the light of which they seemed but the more richly special. It was all special; it was all, for Strether's imagination, more or less rich. The girl at the Genevese school, an isolated interesting attaching creature, then both sensitive and violent, audacious but always forgiven, was the daughter of a French father and an English mother who, early left a widow, had married again—tried afresh with a foreigner; in her career with whom she had apparently given her child no example of comfort. All these people—the people of the English mother's side—had been of condition more or less eminent; yet with oddities and disparities that had often since made Maria, thinking them over, wonder what they really quite rhymed to. It was in any case her belief that the mother, interested and prone to adventure, had

been without conscience, had only thought of ridding herself most quickly of a possible, an actual encumbrance. The father, by her impression, a Frenchman with a name one knew, had been a different matter, leaving his child, she clearly recalled, a memory all fondness, as well as an assured little fortune which was unluckily to make her more or less of a prey later on. She had been in particular, at school, dazzlingly, though quite booklessly, clever; as polyglot as a little Jewess (which she wasn't, oh no!) and chattering French, English, German, Italian, anything one would, in a way that made a clean sweep, if not of prizes and parchments, at least of every 'part', whether memorised or improvised, in the curtained costumed school repertory, and in especial of all mysteries of race and vagueness of reference, all swagger about 'home', among their variegated mates.

It would doubtless be difficult today, as between French and English, to name her and place her; she would certainly show, on knowledge, Miss Gostrey felt, as one of those convenient types who don't keep you explaining—minds with doors as numerous as the many-tongued cluster of confessionals at Saint Peter's. You might confess to her with confidence in Roumelian, and even Roumelian sins. Therefore——! But Strether's narrator covered her implication with a laugh; a laugh by which his betrayal of a sense of the lurid in the picture was also perhaps sufficiently protected. He had a moment of wondering, while his friend went on, what sins might be especially Roumelian. She went on at all events to the mention of her having met the young thing—again by some Swiss lake—in her first married state, which had appeared for the few intermediate years not at least violently disturbed. She had been lovely at that moment, delightful to *her*, full of responsive emotion, of amused recognitions and amusing reminders; and then, once more, much later, after a long interval, equally but differently charming—touching and rather mystifying for the five minutes of an encounter at a railway-station *en province*, during which it had come out that her life was all

changed. Miss Gostrey had understood enough to see, essentially, what had happened, and yet had beautifully dreamed that she was herself faultless. There were doubtless depths in her, but she was all right; Strether would see if she wasn't. She was another person, however—that had been promptly marked—from the small child of nature at the Geneva school; a little person quite made over (as foreign women *were*, compared with American) by marriage. Her situation too had evidently cleared itself up; there would have been—all that was possible—a judicial separation. She had settled in Paris, brought up her daughter, steered her boat. It was no very pleasant boat—especially there—to be in; but Marie de Vionnet would have headed straight. She would have friends, certainly—and very good ones. There she was at all events—and it was very interesting. Her knowing Mr Chad didn't in the least prove she hadn't friends; what it proved was what good ones *he* had. 'I saw that,' said Miss Gostrey, 'that night at the Français; it came out for me in three minutes. I saw *her*—or somebody like her. And so,' she immediately added, 'did you.'

'Oh no—not anybody like her!' Strether laughed. 'But you mean,' he as promptly went on, 'that she has had such an influence on him?'

Miss Gostrey was on her feet; it was time for them to go. 'She has brought him up for her daughter.'

Their eyes, as so often, in candid conference, through their settled glasses, met over it long; after which Strether's again took in the whole place. They were quite alone there now. 'Mustn't she rather—in the time then—have rushed it?'

'Ah she won't of course have lost an hour. But that's just the good mother—the good French one. You must remember that of her—that as a mother she's French, and that for them there's a special providence. It precisely, however—that she mayn't have been able to begin as far back as she'd have liked—makes her grateful for aid.'

Strether took this in as they slowly moved to the house

on their way out. 'She counts on me then to put the thing through?'

'Yes—she counts on you. Oh and first of all of course,' Miss Gostrey added, 'on her—well, convincing you.'

'Ah,' her friend returned, 'she caught Chad young!'

'Yes, but there are women who are for all your "times of life". They're the most wonderful sort.'

She had laughed the words out, but they brought her companion, the next thing, to a stand. 'Is what you mean that she'll try to make a fool of me?'

'Well, I'm wondering what she *will*—with an opportunity —make.'

'What do you call,' Strether asked, 'an opportunity? My going to see her?'

'Ah you must go to see her'—Miss Gostrey was a trifle evasive. 'You can't not do that. You'd have gone to see the other woman. I mean if there had been one—a different sort. It's what you came out for.'

It might be; but Strether distinguished. 'I didn't come out to see *this* sort.'

She had a wonderful look at him now. 'Are you disappointed she isn't worse?'

He for a moment entertained the question, then found for it the frankest of answers. 'Yes. If she were worse she'd be better for our purpose. It would be simpler.'

'Perhaps,' she admitted. 'But won't this be pleasanter?'

'Ah you know,' he promptly replied, 'I didn't come out—wasn't that just what you originally reproached me with? —for the pleasant.'

'Precisely. Therefore I say again what I said at first. You must take things as they come. Besides,' Miss Gostrey added, 'I'm not afraid for myself.'

'For yourself——?'

'Of your seeing her. I trust her. There's nothing she'll say about me. In fact there's nothing she *can*.'

Strether wondered—little as he had thought of this. Then he broke out. 'Oh you women!'

There was something in it at which she flushed. 'Yes—

there we are. We're abysses.' At last she smiled. 'But I risk her!'

He gave himself a shake. 'Well then so do I!' But he added as they passed into the house that he would see Chad the first thing in the morning.

This was the next day the more easily effected that the young man, as it happened, even before he was down, turned up at his hotel. Strether took his coffee, by habit, in the public room; but on his descending for this purpose Chad instantly proposed an adjournment to what he called greater privacy. He had himself as yet had nothing—they would sit down somewhere together; and when after a few steps and a turn into the Boulevard they had, for their greater privacy, sat down among twenty others, our friend saw in his companion's move a fear of the advent of Waymarsh. It was the first time Chad had to that extent given this personage 'away'; and Strether found himself wondering of what it was symptomatic. He made out in a moment that the youth was in earnest as he hadn't yet seen him; which in its turn threw a ray perhaps a trifle startling on what they had each up to that time been treating as earnestness. It was sufficiently flattering, however, that the real thing—if this *was* at last the real thing—should have been determined, as appeared, precisely by an accretion of Strether's importance. For this was what it quickly enough came to—that Chad, rising with the lark, had rushed down to let him know while his morning consciousness was yet young that he had literally made the afternoon before a tremendous impression. Madame de Vionnet wouldn't, couldn't rest till she should have some assurance from him that he *would* consent again to see her. The announcement was made, across their marble-topped table, while the foam of the hot milk was in their cups and its plash still in the air, with the smile of Chad's easiest urbanity; and this expression of his face caused our friend's doubts to gather on the spot into a challenge of the lips. 'See here'—that was all; he only for the moment said again, 'See here.' Chad met it with all his air of straight intelligence, while Strether

remembered again that fancy of the first impression of him, the happy young Pagan, handsome and hard but oddly indulgent whose mysterious measure he had under the street-lamp tried mentally to take. The young Pagan, while a long look passed between them, sufficiently understood. Strether scarce needed at last to say the rest—'I want to know where I am.' But he said it, adding before any answer, something more. 'Are you engaged to be married—is that your secret? to the young lady?'

Chad shook his head with the slow amenity that was one of his ways of conveying that there was time for everything. 'I have no secret—though I may have secrets! I haven't at any rate that one. We're not engaged. No.'

'Then where's the hitch?'

'Do you mean why I haven't already started with you?' Chad, beginning his coffee and buttering his roll, was quite ready to explain. 'Nothing would have induced me—nothing will still induce me—not to try to keep you here as long as you can be made to stay. It's too visibly good for you.' Strether had himself plenty to say about this, but it was amusing also to measure the march of Chad's tone. He had never been more a man of the world, and it was always in his company present to our friend that one was seeing how in successive connexions a man of the world acquitted himself. Chad kept it up beautifully. 'My idea—*voyons!*—is simply that you should let Madame de Vionnet know you, simply that you should consent to know *her*. I don't in the least mind telling you that, clever and charming as she is, she's ever so much in my confidence. All I ask of you is to let her talk to you. You've asked me about what you call my hitch, and so far as it goes she'll explain it to you. She's herself my hitch, hang it—if you must really have it all out. But in a sense,' he hastened in the most wonderful manner to add, 'that you'll quite make out for yourself. She's too good a friend, confound her. Too good, I mean, for me to leave without—without——' It was his first hesitation.

'Without what?'

'Well, without my arranging somehow or other the damnable terms of my sacrifice.'

'It *will* be a sacrifice then?'

'It will be the greatest loss I ever suffered. I owe her so much.'

It was beautiful, the way Chad said these things, and his plea was now confessedly—oh quite flagrantly and publicly —interesting. The moment really took on for Strether an intensity. Chad owed Madame de Vionnet so much? What *did* that do then but clear up the whole mystery? He was indebted for alterations, and she was thereby in a position to have sent in her bill for expenses incurred in reconstruction. What was this at bottom but what had been to be arrived at? Strether sat there arriving at it while he munched toast and stirred his second cup. To do this with the aid of Chad's pleasant earnest face was also to do more besides. No, never before had he been so ready to take him as he was. What was it that had suddenly so cleared up? It was just everybody's character; that is everybody's but—in a measure—his own. Strether felt *his* character receive for the instant a smutch from all the wrong things he had suspected or believed. The person to whom Chad owed it that he could positively turn out such comfort to other persons—such a person was sufficiently raised above any 'breath' by the nature of her work and the young man's steady light. All of which was vivid enough to come and go quickly; though indeed in the midst of it Strether could utter a question. 'Have I your word of honour that if I surrender myself to Madame de Vionnet you'll surrender yourself to *me*?'

Chad laid his hand firmly on his friend's. 'My dear man, you have it.'

There was finally something in his felicity almost embarrassing and oppressive—Strether had begun to fidget under it for the open air and the erect posture. He had signed to the waiter that he wished to pay, and this transaction took some moments, during which he thoroughly felt, while he put down money and pretended—it was quite

hollow—to estimate change, that Chad's higher spirit, his youth, his practice, his paganism, his felicity, his assurance, his impudence, whatever it might be, had consciously scored a success. Well, that was all right so far as it went; his sense of the thing in question covered our friend for a minute like a veil through which—as if he had been muffled—he heard his interlocutor ask him if he mightn't take him over about five. 'Over' was over the river, and over the river was where Madame de Vionnet lived, and five was that very afternoon. They got at last out of the place—got out before he answered. He lighted in the street a cigarette, which again gave him more time. But it was already sharp for him that there was no use in time. 'What does she propose to do to me?' he had presently demanded.

Chad had no delays. 'Are you afraid of her?'

'Oh immensely. Don't you see it?'

'Well,' said Chad, 'she won't do anything worse to you than make you like her.'

'It's just of that I'm afraid.'

'Then it's not fair to me.'

Strether cast about. 'It's fair to your mother.'

'Oh,' said Chad, 'are you afraid of *her*?'

'Scarcely less. Or perhaps even more. But is this lady against your interests at home?' Strether went on.

'Not directly, no doubt; but she's greatly in favour of them here.'

'And what—"here"—does she consider them to be?'

'Well, good relations!'

'With herself?'

'With herself.'

'And what is it that makes them so good?'

'What? Well, that's exactly what you'll make out if you'll only go, as I'm supplicating you, to see her.'

Strether stared at him with a little of the wanness, no doubt, that the vision of more to 'make out' could scarce help producing. 'I mean *how* good are they?'

'Oh awfully good.'

Again Strether had faltered, but it was brief. It was all

very well, but there was nothing now he wouldn't risk. 'Excuse me, but I must really—as I began by telling you—know where I am. Is she bad?'

'"Bad"?'—Chad echoed it, but without a shock. 'Is that what's implied——?'

'When relations are good?' Strether felt a little silly, and was even conscious of a foolish laugh, at having it imposed on him to have appeared to speak so. What indeed was he talking about? His stare had relaxed; he looked now all round him. But something in him brought him back, though he still didn't know quite how to turn it. The two or three ways he thought of, and one of them in particular, were, even with scruples dismissed, too ugly. He none the less at last found something. 'Is her life without reproach?'

It struck him, directly he had found it, as pompous and priggish; so much so that he was thankful to Chad for taking it only in the right spirit. The young man spoke so immensely to the point that the effect was practically of positive blandness. 'Absolutely without reproach. A beautiful life. *Allez donc voir!*'

These last words were, in the liberality of their confidence, so imperative that Strether went through no form of assent; but before they separated it had been confirmed that he should be picked up at a quarter to five.

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BOOK SIXTH

I

IT WAS quite by half-past five—after the two men had been together in Madame de Vionnet's drawing-room not more than a dozen minutes—that Chad, with a look at his watch and then another at their hostess, said genially, gaily, 'I've an engagement, and I know you won't complain if I leave him with you. He'll interest you immensely; and as for her,' he declared to Strether, 'I assure you, if you're at all nervous, she's perfectly safe.'

He had left them to be embarrassed or not by this guarantee, as they could best manage, and embarrassment was a thing that Strether wasn't at first sure Madame de Vionnet escaped. He escaped it himself, to his surprise; but he had grown used by this time to thinking of himself as brazen. She occupied, his hostess, in the Rue de Bellechasse, the first floor of an old house to which our visitors had had access from an old clean court. The court was large and open, full of revelations, for our friend, of the habit of privacy, the peace of intervals, the dignity of distances and approaches; the house, to his restless sense, was in the high homely style of an elder day, and the ancient Paris that he was always looking for—sometimes intensely felt, sometimes more acutely missed—was in the immemorial polish of the wide waxed staircase and in the fine *boiseries*, the medallions, mouldings, mirrors, great clear spaces, of the greyish-white salon into which he had been shown. He seemed at the very outset to see her, in the midst of possessions not vulgarly numerous, but hereditary cherished charming. While his eyes turned after a little from those of his hostess and Chad freely talked—not in the least about *him*, but about other people, people he didn't

know, and quite as if he did know them—he found himself making out, as a background of the occupant, some glory, some prosperity of the First Empire, some Napoleonic glamour, some dim lustre of the great legend; elements clinging still to all the consular chairs and mythological brasses and sphinxes' heads and faded surfaces of satin striped with alternate silk.

The place itself went further back—that he guessed, and how old Paris continued in a manner to echo there; but the post-revolutionary period, the world he vaguely thought of as the world of Chateaubriand, of Madame de Staël, even of the young Lamartine, had left its stamp of harps and urns and torches, a stamp impressed on sundry small objects, ornaments and relics. He had never before, to his knowledge, had present to him relics, of any special dignity, of a private order—little old miniatures, medallions, pictures, books; books in leather bindings, pinkish and greenish, with gilt garlands on the back, ranged, together with other promiscuous properties, under the glass of brass-mounted cabinets. His attention took them all tenderly into account. They were among the matters that marked Madame de Vionnet's apartment as something quite different from Miss Gostrey's little museum of bargains and from Chad's lovely home; he recognised it as founded much more on old accumulations that had possibly from time to time shrunken than on any contemporary method of acquisition or form of curiosity. Chad and Miss Gostrey had rummaged and purchased and picked up and exchanged, sifting, selecting, comparing; whereas the mistress of the scene before him, beautifully passive under the spell of transmission—transmission from her father's line, he quite made up his mind—had only received, accepted and been quiet. When she hadn't been quiet she had been moved at the most to some occult charity for some fallen fortune. There had been objects she or her predecessors might even conceivably have parted with under need; but Strether couldn't suspect them of having sold old pieces to get 'better' ones. They would have felt no difference as to better

or worse. He could but imagine their having felt—perhaps in emigration, in proscription, for his sketch was slight and confused—the pressure of want or the obligation of sacrifice.

The pressure of want—whatever might be the case with the other force—was, however, presumably not active now, for the tokens of a chastened ease still abounded after all, many marks of a taste whose discriminations might perhaps have been called eccentric. He guessed at intense little preferences and sharp little exclusions, a deep suspicion of the vulgar and a personal view of the right. The general result of this was something for which he had no name on the spot quite ready, but something he would have come nearest to naming in speaking of it as the air of supreme respectability, the consciousness, small, still, reserved, but none the less distinct and diffused, of private honour. The air of supreme respectability—that was a strange blank wall for his adventure to have brought him to break his nose against. It had in fact, as he was now aware, filled all the approaches, hovered in the court as he passed, hung on the staircase as he mounted, sounded in the grave rumble of the old bell, as little electric as possible, of which Chad, at the door, had pulled the ancient but neatly-kept tassel; it formed in short the clearest medium of its particular kind that he had ever breathed. He would have answered for it at the end of a quarter of an hour that some of the glass cases contained swords and epaulettes of ancient colonels and generals; medals and orders once pinned over hearts that had long since ceased to beat; snuff-boxes bestowed on ministers and envoys; copies of works presented, with inscriptions, by authors now classic. At bottom of it all for him was the sense of her rare unlikeness to the women he had known. This sense had grown, since the day before, the more he recalled her, and had been above all singularly fed by his talk with Chad in the morning. Everything in fine made her immeasurably new, and nothing so new as the old house and the old objects. There were books, two or three, on a small table near his chair, but they hadn't the

lemon-coloured covers with which his eye had begun to dally from the hour of his arrival and to the opportunity of a further acquaintance with which he had for a fortnight now altogether succumbed. On another table, across the room, he made out the great *Revue*; but even that familiar face, conspicuous in Mrs Newsome's parlours, scarce counted here as a modern note. He was sure on the spot—and he afterwards knew he was right—that this was a touch of Chad's own hand. What would Mrs Newsome say to the circumstance that Chad's interested 'influence' kept her paper-knife in the *Revue*? The interested influence at any rate had, as we say, gone straight to the point—had in fact soon left it quite behind.

She was seated, near the fire, on a small stuffed and fringed chair, one of the few modern articles in the room; and she leaned back in it with her hands clasped in her lap and no movement, in all her person, but the fine prompt play of her deep young face. The fire, under the low white marble, undraped and academic, had burnt down to the silver ashes of light wood; one of the windows, at a distance, stood open to the mildness and stillness, out of which, in the short pauses, came the faint sound, pleasant and homely, almost rustic, of a plash and a clatter of *sabots* from some coach-house on the other side of the court. Madame de Vionnet, while Strether was there, wasn't to shift her posture by an inch. 'I don't think you seriously believe in what you're doing,' she said; 'but all the same, you know, I'm going to treat you quite as if I did.'

'By which you mean,' Strether directly replied, 'quite as if you didn't! I assure you it won't make the least difference with me how you treat me.'

'Well,' she said, taking that menace bravely and philosophically enough, 'the only thing that really matters is that you shall get on with me.'

'Ah but I don't!' he immediately returned.

It gave her another pause; which, however, she happily enough shook off. 'Will you consent to go on with me a little—provisionally—as if you did?'

Then it was that he saw how she had decidedly come all the way; and there accompanied it an extraordinary sense of her raising from somewhere below him her beautiful suppliant eyes. He might have been perched at his door-step or at his window and she standing in the road. For a moment he let her stand and couldn't moreover have spoken. It had been sad, of a sudden, with a sadness that was like a cold breath in his face. 'What can I do,' he finally asked, 'but listen to you as I promised Chadwick?'

'Ah but what I'm asking you,' she quickly said, 'isn't what Mr Newsome had in mind.' She spoke at present, he saw, as if to take courageously *all* her risk. 'This is my own idea and a different thing.'

It gave poor Strether in truth—uneasy as it made him too—something of the thrill of a bold perception justified. 'Well,' he answered kindly enough, 'I was sure a moment since that some idea of your own had come to you.'

She seemed still to look up at him, but now more serenely. 'I made out you were sure—and that helped it to come. So you see,' she continued, 'we do get on.'

'Oh but it appears to me I don't at all meet your request. How can I when I don't understand it?'

'It isn't at all necessary you should understand; it will do quite well enough if you simply remember it. Only feel I trust you—and for nothing so tremendous after all. Just,' she said with a wonderful smile, 'for common civility.'

Strether had a long pause while they sat again face to face, as they had sat, scarce less conscious, before the poor lady had crossed the stream. She was the poor lady for Strether now because clearly she had some trouble, and her appeal to him could only mean that her trouble was deep. He couldn't help it; it wasn't his fault; he had done nothing; but by a turn of the hand she had somehow made their encounter a relation. And the relation profited by a mass of things that were not strictly in it or of it; by the very air in which they sat, by the high cold delicate room, by the world outside and the little plash in the court, by the First Empire and the relics in the stiff cabinets, by matters as far

off as those and by others as near as the unbroken clasp of her hands in her lap and the look her expression had of being most natural when her eyes were most fixed. 'You count upon me of course for something really much greater than it sounds.'

'Oh it sounds great enough too!' she laughed at this.

He found himself in time on the point of telling her that she was, as Miss Barrace called it, wonderful; but, catching himself up, he said something else instead. 'What was it Chad's idea then that you should say to me?'

'Ah his idea was simply what a man's idea always is—to put every effort off on the woman.'

'The "woman"——?' Strether slowly echoed.

'The woman he likes—and just in proportion as he likes her. In proportion too—for shifting the trouble—as she likes *him*.'

Strether followed it; then with an abruptness of his own: 'How much do you like Chad?'

'Just as much as *that*—to take all, with you, on myself.' But she got at once again away from this. 'I've been trembling as if we were to stand or fall by what you think of me; and I'm even now,' she went on wonderfully, 'drawing a long breath—and, yes, truly taking a great courage—from the hope that I don't in fact strike you as impossible.'

'That's at all events, clearly,' he observed after an instant, 'the way I don't strike *you*.'

'Well,' she so far assented, 'as you haven't yet said you *won't* have the little patience with me I ask for——'

'You draw splendid conclusions? Perfectly. But I don't understand them.' Strether pursued. 'You seem to me to ask for much more than you need. What, at the worst for you, what at the best for myself, can I after all do? I can use no pressure that I haven't used. You come really late with your request. I've already done all that for myself the case admits of. I've said my say, and here I am.'

'Yes, here you are, fortunately!' Madame de Vionnet laughed. 'Mrs Newsome,' she added in another tone, 'didn't think you can do so little.'

He had an hesitation, but he brought the words out. 'Well, she thinks so now.'

'Do you mean by that——?' But she also hung fire.

'Do I mean what?'

She still rather faltered. 'Pardon me if I touch on it, but if I'm saying extraordinary things, why, perhaps, mayn't I? Besides, doesn't it properly concern us to know?'

'To know what?' he insisted as after thus beating about the bush she had again dropped.

She made the effort. 'Has she given you up?'

He was amazed afterwards to think how simply and quietly he had met it. 'Not yet.' It was almost as if he were a trifle disappointed—had expected still more of her freedom. But he went straight on. 'Is that what Chad has told you will happen to me?'

She was evidently charmed with the way he took it. 'If you mean if we've talked of it—most certainly. And the question's not what has had least to do with my wishing to see you.'

'To judge if I'm the sort of man a woman *can*——?'

'Precisely,' she exclaimed—'you wonderful gentleman! I do judge—*I have* judged. A woman can't. You're safe—with every right to be. You'd be much happier if you'd only believe it.'

Strether was silent a little; then he found himself speaking with a cynicism of confidence of which even at the moment the sources were strange to him. 'I try to believe it. But it's a marvel,' he exclaimed, 'how *you* already get at it!'

Oh she was able to say. 'Remember how much I was on the way to it through Mr Newsome—before I saw you. He thinks everything of your strength.'

'Well, I can bear almost anything!' our friend briskly interrupted. Deep and beautiful on this her smile came back, and with the effect of making him hear what he had said just as she had heard it. He easily enough felt that it gave him away, but what in truth had everything done but that? It had been all very well to think at moments that he

was holding her nose down and that he had coerced her: what had he by this time done but let her practically see that he accepted their relation? What was their relation moreover—though light and brief enough in form as yet—but whatever she might choose to make it? Nothing could prevent her—certainly he couldn't—from making it pleasant. At the back of his head, behind everything, was the sense that she was—there, before him, close to him, in vivid imperative form—one of the rare women he had so often heard of, read of, thought of, but never met, whose very presence, look, voice, the mere contemporaneous *fact* of whom, from the moment it was at all presented, made a relation of mere recognition. That was not the kind of woman he had ever found Mrs Newsome, a contemporaneous fact who had been distinctly slow to establish herself; and at present, confronted with Madame de Vionnet, he felt the simplicity of his original impression of Miss Gostrey. She certainly had been a fact of rapid growth; but the world was wide, each day was more and more a new lesson. There were at any rate even among the stranger ones relations and relations. 'Of course I suit Chad's grand way,' he quickly added. 'He hasn't had much difficulty in working me in.'

She seemed to deny a little, on the young man's behalf, by the rise of her eyebrows, an intention of any process at all inconsiderate. 'You must know how grieved he'd be if you were to lose anything. He believes you can keep his mother patient.'

Strether wondered with his eyes on her. 'I see. *That's* then what you really want of me. And how am I to do it? Perhaps you'll tell me that.'

'Simply tell her the truth.'

'And what do you call the truth?'

'Well, *any* truth—about us all—that you see yourself. I leave it to you.'

'Thank you very much. I like,' Strether laughed with a slight harshness, 'the way you leave things!'

But she insisted kindly, gently, as if it wasn't so bad. 'Be perfectly honest. Tell her all.'

'All?' he oddly echoed.

'Tell her the simple truth,' Madame de Vionnet again pleaded.

'But what *is* the simple truth? The simple truth is exactly what I'm trying to discover.'

She looked about a while, but presently she came back to him. 'Tell her, fully and clearly, about *us*.'

Strether meanwhile had been staring. 'You and your daughter?'

'Yes—little Jeanne and me. Tell her,' she just slightly quavered, 'you like us.'

'And what good will that do me? Or rather'—he caught himself up—'what good will it do *you*?'

She looked graver. 'None, you believe, really?'

Strether debated. 'She didn't send me out to "like" you.'

'Oh,' she charmingly contended, 'she sent you out to face the facts.'

He admitted after an instant that there was something in that. 'But how can I face them till I know what they are? Do you want him,' he then braced himself to ask, 'to marry your daughter?'

She gave a headshake as noble as it was prompt. 'No—not that.'

'And he really doesn't want to himself?'

She repeated the movement, but now with a strange light in her face. 'He likes her too much.'

Strether wondered. 'To be willing to consider, you mean, the question of taking her to America?'

'To be willing to do anything with her but be immensely kind and nice—really tender of her. We watch over her, and you must help us. You must see her again.'

Strether felt awkward. 'Ah with pleasure—she's so remarkably attractive.'

The mother's eagerness with which Madame de Vionnet jumped at this was to come back to him later as beautiful in its grace. 'The dear thing *did* please you?' Then as he

met it with the largest 'Oh!' of enthusiasm: 'She's perfect. She's my joy.'

'Well, I'm sure that—if one were near her and saw more of her—she'd be mine.'

'Then,' said Madame de Vionnet, 'tell Mrs Newsome that!'

He wondered the more. 'What good will that do you?' As she appeared unable at once to say, however, he brought out something else. 'Is your daughter in love with our friend?'

'Ah,' she rather startlingly answered, 'I wish you'd find out!'

He showed his surprise. 'I? A stranger?'

'Oh you won't be a stranger—presently. You shall see her quite, I assure you, as if you weren't.'

It remained for him none the less an extraordinary notion. 'It seems to me surely that if her mother can't——'

'Ah little girls and their mothers to-day!' she rather inconsequently broke in. But she checked herself with something she seemed to give out as after all more to the point. 'Tell her I've been good for him. Don't you think I have?'

It had its effect on him—more than at the moment he quite measured. Yet he was consciously enough touched. 'Oh, if it's all *you*——!'

'Well, it may not be "all",' she interrupted, 'but it's to a great extent. Really and truly,' she added in a tone that was to take its place with him among things remembered.

'Then it's very wonderful.' He smiled at her from a face that he felt as strained, and her own face for a moment kept him so. At last she also got up. 'Well, don't you think that for that——'

'I ought to save you?' So it was that the way to meet her —and the way, as well, in a manner, to get off—came over him. He heard himself use the exorbitant word, the very sound of which helped to determine his flight. 'I'll save you if I can.'

II

IN CHAD'S lovely home, however, one evening ten days later, he felt himself present at the collapse of the question of Jeanne de Vionnet's shy secret. He had been dining there in the company of that young lady and her mother, as well as of other persons, and he had gone into the *petit salon*, at Chad's request, on purpose to talk with her. The young man had put this to him as a favour—'I should like so awfully to know what you think of her. It will really be a chance for you,' he had said, 'to see the *jeune fille*—I mean the type—as she actually is, and I don't think that, as an observer of manners, it's a thing you ought to miss. It will be an impression that—whatever else you take—you can carry home with you, where you'll find again so much to compare it with.'

Strether knew well enough with what Chad wished him to compare it, and though he entirely assented he hadn't yet somehow been so deeply reminded that he was being, as he constantly though mutely expressed it, used. He was as far as ever from making out exactly to what end; but he was none the less constantly accompanied by a sense of the service he rendered. He conceived only that this service was highly agreeable to those who profited by it; and he was indeed still waiting for the moment at which he should catch it in the act of proving disagreeable, proving in some degree intolerable, to himself. He failed quite to see how his situation could clear up at all logically except by some turn of events that would give him the pretext of disgust. He was building from day to day on the possibility of disgust, but each day brought forth meanwhile a new and more engaging bend of the road. That possibility was now ever so much further from sight than on the eve of his arrival, and he perfectly felt that, should it come at all, it would have to be at best inconsequent and violent. He struck himself as a

little nearer to it only when he asked himself what service, in such a life of utility, he was after all rendering Mrs Newsome. When he wished to help himself to believe that he was still all right he reflected—and in fact with wonder—on the unimpaired frequency of their correspondence; in relation to which what was after all more natural than that it should become more frequent just in proportion as their problem became more complicated?

Certain it is at any rate that he now often brought himself balm by the question, with the rich consciousness of yesterday's letter, 'Well, what can I do more than that—what can I do more than tell her everything?' To persuade himself that he did tell her, had told her, everything, he used to try to think of particular things he hadn't told her. When at rare moments and in the watches of the night he pounced on one it generally showed itself to be—to a deeper scrutiny—not quite truly of the essence. When anything new struck him as coming up, or anything already noted as reappearing, he always immediately wrote, as if for fear that if he didn't he would miss something; and also that he might be able to say to himself from time to time, 'She knows it *now*, even while I worry.' It was a great comfort to him in general not to have left past things to be dragged to light and explained; not to have to produce at so late a stage anything not produced, or anything even veiled and attenuated, at the moment. She knew it now: that was what he said to himself to-night in relation to the fresh fact of Chad's acquaintance with the two ladies—not to speak of the fresher one of his own. Mrs Newsome knew in other words that very night at Woollett that he himself knew Madame de Vionnet and that he had conscientiously been to see her; also that he had found her remarkably attractive and that there would probably be a good deal more to tell. But she further knew, or would know very soon, that, again conscientiously, he hadn't repeated his visit; and that when Chad had asked him on the Countess's behalf—Strether made her out vividly, with a thought at the back of his head, a Countess—if he wouldn't name a day for dining

with her, he had replied lucidly: 'Thank you very much—impossible.' He had begged the young man would present his excuses and had trusted him to understand that it couldn't really strike one as quite the straight thing. He hadn't reported to Mrs Newsome that he had promised to 'save' Madame de Vionnet; but, so far as he was concerned with that reminiscence, he hadn't at any rate promised to haunt her house. What Chad had understood could only, in truth, be inferred from Chad's behaviour, which had been in this connexion as easy as in every other. He was easy, always, when he understood; he was easier still, if possible, when he didn't; he had replied that he would make it right; and he had proceeded to do this by substituting the present occasion—as he was ready to substitute others—for any, for every occasion as to which his old friend should have a funny scruple.

'Oh but I'm not a little foreign girl; I'm just as English as I can be,' Jeanne de Vionnet had said to him as soon as, in the *petit salon*, he sank, shyly enough on his own side, into the place near her vacated by Madame Gloriani at his approach. Madame Gloriani, who was in black velvet, with white lace and powdered hair, and whose somewhat massive majesty melted, at any contact, into the graciousness of some incomprehensible tongue, moved away to make room for the vague gentleman, after benevolent greetings to him which embodied, as he believed, in baffling accents, some recognition of his face from a couple of Sundays before. Then he had remarked—making the most of the advantage of his years—that it frightened him quite enough to find himself dedicated to the entertainment of a little foreign girl. There were girls he wasn't afraid of—he was quite bold with little Americans. Thus it was that she had defended herself to the end—'Oh but I'm almost American too. That's what Mamma has wanted me to be—I mean *like* that; for she has wanted me to have lots of freedom. She has known such good results from it.'

She was fairly beautiful to him—a faint pastel in an oval frame: he thought of her already as of some lurking image

in a long gallery, the portrait of a small old-time princess of whom nothing was known but that she had died young. Little Jeanne wasn't, doubtless, to die young, but one couldn't, all the same, bear on her lightly enough. It was bearing hard, it was bearing as *he*, in any case, wouldn't bear, to concern himself, in relation to her, with the question of a young man. Odious really the question of a young man; one didn't treat such a person as a maidservant suspected of a 'follower'. And then young men, young men—well, the thing was their business simply, or was at all events hers. She was fluttered, fairly fevered—to the point of a little glitter that came and went in her eyes and a pair of pink spots that stayed in her cheeks—with the great adventure of dining out and with the greater one still, possibly, of finding a gentleman whom she must think of as very, very old, a gentleman with eye-glasses, wrinkles, a long grizzled moustache. She spoke the prettiest English, our friend thought, that he had ever heard spoken, just as he had believed her a few minutes before to be speaking the prettiest French. He wondered almost wistfully if such a sweep of the lyre didn't react on the spirit itself; and his fancy had in fact, before he knew it, begun so to stray and embroider that he finally found himself, absent and extravagant, sitting with the child in a friendly silence. Only by this time he felt her flutter to have fortunately dropped and that she was more at her ease. She trusted him, liked him, and it was to come back to him afterwards that she had told him things. She had dipped into the waiting medium at last and found neither surge nor chill—nothing but the small splash she could herself make in the pleasant warmth, nothing but the safety of dipping and dipping again. At the end of the ten minutes he was to spend with her his impression—with all it had thrown off and all it had taken in—was complete. She had been free, as she knew freedom, partly to show him that, unlike other little persons she knew, she had imbibed that ideal. She was delightfully quaint about herself, but the vision of what she had imbibed was what most held him. It really consisted, he was soon enough to feel, in just

one great little matter, the fact that, whatever her nature, she was thoroughly—he had to cast about for the word, but it came—bred. He couldn't of course on so short an acquaintance speak for her nature, but the idea of breeding was what she had meanwhile dropped into his mind. He had never yet known it so sharply presented. Her mother gave it, no doubt; but her mother, to make that less sensible, gave so much else besides, and on neither of the two previous occasions, extraordinary woman, Strether felt, anything like what she was giving to-night. Little Jeanne was a case, an exquisite case of education; whereas the Countess, whom it so amused him to think of by that denomination, was a case, also exquisite, of—well, he didn't know what.

'He has wonderful taste, *notre jeune homme*': this was what Gloriani said to him on turning away from the inspection of a small picture suspended near the door of the room. The high celebrity in question had just come in, apparently in search of Mademoiselle de Vionnet, but while Strether had got up from beside her their fellow guest, with his eye sharply caught, had paused for a long look. The thing was a landscape, of no size, but of the French school, as our friend was glad to feel he knew, and also of a quality—which he liked to think he should also have guessed; its frame was large out of proportion to the canvas, and he had never seen a person look at anything, he thought, just as Gloriani, with his nose very near and quick movements of the head from side to side and bottom to top, examined this feature of Chad's collection. The artist used that word the next moment, smiling courteously, wiping his nippers and looking round him further—paying the place in short, by the very manner of his presence and by something Strether fancied he could make out in this particular glance, such a tribute as, to the latter's sense, settled many things once for all. Strether was conscious at this instant, for that matter, as he hadn't yet been, of how, round about him, quite without him, they *were* consistently settled. Gloriani's smile, deeply Italian, he considered, and finely inscrutable, had had for him, during dinner, at which

they were not neighbours, an indefinite greeting; but the quality in it was gone that had appeared on the other occasion to turn him inside out; it was as if even the momentary link supplied by the doubt between them had snapped. He was conscious now of the final reality, which was that there wasn't so much a doubt as a difference altogether; all the more that over the difference the famous sculptor seemed to signal almost condolingly, yet oh how vacantly! as across some great flat sheet of water. He threw out the bridge of a charming hollow civility on which Strether wouldn't have trusted his own full weight a moment. That idea, even though but transient and perhaps belated, had performed the office of putting Strether more at his ease, and the blurred picture had already dropped—dropped with the sound of something else said and with his becoming aware, by another quick turn, that Gloriani was now on the sofa talking with Jeanne, while he himself had in his ears again the familiar friendliness and the elusive meaning of the 'Oh, oh, oh!' that had made him, a fortnight before, challenge Miss Barrace in vain. She had always the air, this picturesque and original lady, who struck him, so oddly, as both antique and modern—she had always the air of taking up some joke that one had already had out with her. The point itself, no doubt, was what was antique, and the use she made of it what was modern. He felt just now that her good-natured irony did bear on something, and it troubled him a little that she wouldn't be more explicit, only assuring him, with the pleasure of observation so visible in her, that she wouldn't tell him more for the world.

He could take refuge but in asking her what she had done with Waymarsh, though it must be added that he felt himself a little on the way to a clue after she had answered that this personage was, in the other room, engaged in conversation with Madame de Vionnet. He stared a moment at the image of such a conjunction; then, for Miss Barrace's benefit, he wondered. 'Is she too then under the charm——?'

'No, not a bit'—Miss Barrace was prompt. 'She makes nothing of him. She's bored. She won't help you with him.'

'Oh,' Strether laughed, 'she can't do everything.'

'Of course not—wonderful as she is. Besides, he makes nothing of *her*. She won't take him from me—though she wouldn't, no doubt, having other affairs in hand, even if she could. I've never,' said Miss Barrace, 'seen her fail with any one before. And to-night, when she's so magnificent, it would seem to her strange—if she minded. So at any rate I have him all. *Je suis tranquille!*'

Strether understood, so far as that went; but he was feeling for his clue. 'She strikes you to-night as particularly magnificent?'

'Surely. Almost as I've never seen her. Doesn't she you? Why, it's *for* you.'

He persisted in his candour. '"For" me——?'

'Oh, oh, oh!' cried Miss Barrace, who persisted in the opposite of that quality.

'Well,' he acutely admitted. 'she *is* different. She's gay.'

'She's gay!' Miss Barrace laughed. 'And she has beautiful shoulders—though there's nothing different in that.'

'No,' said Strether, 'one was sure of her shoulders. It isn't her shoulders.'

His companion, with renewed mirth and the finest sense, between the puffs of her cigarette, of the drollery of things, appeared to find their conversation highly delightful. 'Yes, it isn't her shoulders.'

'What then is it?' Strether earnestly inquired.

'Why, it's *she*—simply. It's her mood. It's her charm.'

'Of course it's her charm, but we're speaking of the difference.'

'Well,' Miss Barrace explained, 'she's just brilliant, as we used to say. That's all. She's various. She's fifty women.'

'Ah but only one'—Strether kept it clear—'at a time.'

'Perhaps. But in fifty times——!'

'Oh we shan't come to that,' our friend declared; and the next moment he had moved in another direction. 'Will you answer me a plain question? Will she ever divorce?'

Miss Barrace looked at him through all her tortoise-shell. 'Why should she?'

It wasn't what he had asked for, he signified; but he met it well enough. 'To marry Chad.'

'Why should she marry Chad?'

'Because I'm convinced she's very fond of him. She has done wonders for him.'

'Well then, how could she do more? Marrying a man, or a woman either,' Miss Barrace sagely went on, 'is never the wonder, for any Jack and Jill can bring *that* off. The wonder is their doing such things without marrying.'

Strether considered a moment this proposition. 'You mean it's so beautiful for our friends simply to go on so?'

But whatever he said made her laugh. 'Beautiful.'

He nevertheless insisted. 'And *that* because it's disinterested?'

She was now, however, suddenly tired of the question. 'Yes, then—call it that. Besides, she'll never divorce. Don't, moreover,' she added, 'believe everything you hear about her husband.'

'He's not then,' Strether asked, 'a wretch?'

'Oh yes. But charming.'

'Do you know him?'

'I've met him. He's *bien aimable*.'

'To every one but his wife?'

'Oh for all I know, to her too—to any, to every woman. I hope you at any rate,' she pursued with a quick change, 'appreciate the care I take of Mr Waymarsh.'

'Oh immensely.' But Strether was not yet in line. 'At all events,' he roundly brought out, 'the attachment's an innocent one.'

'Mine and his? Ah,' she laughed, 'don't rob it of *all* interest!'

'I mean our friend's here—to the lady we've been speaking of.' That was what he had settled to as an indirect but none the less closely involved consequence of his impression of Jeanne. That was where he meant to stay. 'It's innocent,' he repeated—'I see the whole thing.'

Mystified by his abrupt declaration, she had glanced over at Gloriani as at the unnamed subject of his allusion, but the next moment she had understood; though indeed not before Strether had noticed her momentary mistake and wondered what might possibly be behind that too. He already knew that the sculptor admired Madame de Vionnet; but did this admiration also represent an attachment of which the innocence was discussable? He was moving verily in a strange air and on ground not of the firmest. He looked hard for an instant at Miss Barrace, but she had already gone on. 'All right with Mr Newsome? Why of course she is!'—and she got gaily back to the question of her own good friend. 'I dare say you're surprised that I'm not worn out with all I see—it being so much!— of Sitting Bull. But I'm not, you know—I don't mind him; I bear up, and we get on beautifully. I'm very strange; I'm like that; and often I can't explain. There are people who are supposed interesting or remarkable or whatever, and who bore me to death; and then there are others as to whom nobody can understand what anybody sees in them—in whom I see no end of things.' Then after she had smoked a moment, 'He's touching, you know,' she said.

'"Know"?' Strether echoed—'don't I, indeed? We must move you almost to tears.'

'Oh but I don't mean *you!*' she laughed.

'You ought to then, for the worst sign of all—as I must have it for you—is that you can't help me. That's when a woman pities.'

'Ah but I do help you!' she cheerfully insisted.

Again he looked at her hard, and then after a pause: 'No you don't!'

Her tortoise-shell, on its long chain, rattled down. 'I help you with Sitting Bull. That's a good deal.'

'Oh that, yes.' But Strether hesitated. 'Do you mean he talks of me?'

'So that I have to defend you? No, never.'

'I see,' Strether mused. 'It's too deep.'

'That's his only fault,' she returned—'that everything,

with him, is too deep. He has depths of silence—which he breaks only at the longest intervals by a remark. And when the remark comes it's always something he has seen or felt for himself—never a bit banal. *That* would be what one might have feared and what would kill me. But never.' She smoked again as she thus, with amused complacency, appreciated her acquisition. 'And never about you. We keep clear of you. We're wonderful. But I'll tell you what he does do,' she continued: 'he tries to make me presents.'

'Presents?' poor Strether echoed, conscious with a pang that *he* hadn't yet tried that in any quarter.

'Why you see,' she explained, 'he's as fine as ever in the victoria; so that when I leave him, as I often do almost for hours—he likes it so—at the doors of shops, the sight of him there helps me, when I come out, to know my carriage away off in the rank. But sometimes, for a change, he goes with me into the shops, and then I've all I can do to prevent his buying me things.'

'He wants to "treat" you?' Strether almost gasped at all he himself hadn't thought of. He had a sense of admiration. 'Oh he's much more in the real tradition than I. Yes,' he mused; 'it's the sacred rage.'

'The sacred rage, exactly!'—and Miss Barrace, who hadn't before heard this term applied, recognised its bearing with a clap of her gemmed hands. 'Now I do know why he's not banal. But I do prevent him all the same—and if you saw what he sometimes selects—from buying. I save him hundreds and hundreds. I only take flowers.'

'Flowers?' Strether echoed again with a rueful reflexion. How many nosegays had her present converser sent?

'Innocent flowers,' she pursued, 'as much as he likes. And he sends me splendours; he knows all the best places —he has found them for himself; he's wonderful.'

'He hasn't told them to *me*,' her friend smiled; 'he has a life of his own.' But Strether had swung back to the consciousness that for himself after all it never would have done. Waymarsh hadn't Mrs Waymarsh in the least to consider, whereas Lambert Strether had constantly, in the

inmost honour of his thoughts, to consider Mrs Newsome. He liked moreover to feel how much his friend was in the real tradition. Yet he had his conclusion. '*What* a rage it is!' He had worked it out. 'It's an opposition.'

She followed, but at a distance. 'That's what I feel. Yet to what?'

'Well, he thinks, you know, that *I've* a life of my own. And I haven't!'

'You haven't?' She showed doubt, and her laugh confirmed it. 'Oh, oh, oh!'

'No—not for myself. I seem to have a life only for other people.'

'Ah for them and *with* them! Just now for instance with——'

'Well, with whom?' he asked before she had had time to say.

His tone had the effect of making her hesitate and even, as he guessed, speak with a difference. 'Say with Miss Gostrey. What do you do for *her*?'

It really made him wonder. 'Nothing at all!'

III

MADAME DE VIONNET, having meanwhile come in, was at present close to them, and Miss Barrace hereupon, instead of risking a rejoinder, became again with a look that measured her from top to toe all mere long-handled appreciative tortoise-shell. She had struck our friend, from the first of her appearing, as dressed for a great occasion, and she met still more than on either of the others the conception reawakened in him at their garden-party, the idea of the *femme du monde* in her habit as she lived. Her bare shoulders and arms were white and beautiful; the materials of her dress, a mixture, as he supposed, of silk and crape, were of a silvery grey so artfully composed as to give an

impression of warm splendour; and round her neck she wore a collar of large old emeralds, the green note of which was more dimly repeated, at other points of her apparel, in embroidery, in enamel, in satin, in substances and textures vaguely rich. Her head, extremely fair and exquisitely festal, was like a happy fancy, a notion of the antique, of an old precious medal, some silver coin of the Renaissance; while her slim lightness and brightness, her gaiety, her expression, her decision, contributed to an effect that might have been felt by a poet as half mythological and half conventional. He could have compared her to a goddess still partly engaged in a morning cloud, or to a sea-nymph waist-high in the summer surge. Above all she suggested to him the reflexion that the *femme du monde*—in these finest developments of the type—was, like Cleopatra in the play, indeed various and multifold. She had aspects, characters, days, nights—or had them at least, showed them by a mysterious law of her own, when in addition to everything she happened also to be a woman of genius. She was an obscure person, a muffled person one day, and a showy person, an uncovered person the next. He thought of Madame de Vionnet to-night as showy and uncovered, though he felt the formula rough, because, thanks to one of the short-cuts of genius, she had taken all his categories by surprise. Twice during dinner he had met Chad's eyes in a longish look; but these communications had in truth only stirred up again old ambiguities—so little was it clear from them whether they were an appeal or an admonition. 'You see how I'm fixed' was what they appeared to convey; yet how he was fixed was exactly what Strether didn't see. However, perhaps he should see now.

'Are you capable of the very great kindness of going to relieve Newsome, for a few minutes, of the rather crushing responsibility of Madame Gloriani, while I say a word, if he'll allow me, to Mr Strether, of whom I've a question to ask? Our host ought to talk a bit to those other ladies, and I'll come back in a minute to your rescue.' She made this proposal to Miss Barrace as if her consciousness of a special

duty had just flickered up, but that lady's recognition of Strether's little start at it—as at a betrayal on the speaker's part of a domesticated state—was as mute as his own comment; and after an instant, when their fellow guest had good-naturedly left them, he had been given something else to think of. 'Why has Maria so suddenly gone? Do you know?' That was the question Madame de Vionnet had brought with her.

'I'm afraid I've no reason to give you but the simple reason I've had from her in a note—the sudden obligation to join in the south a sick friend who has got worse.'

'Ah then she has been writing you?'

'Not since she went—I had only a brief explanatory word before she started. I went to see her,' Strether explained—'it was the day after I called on you—but she was already on her way, and her concierge told me that in case of my coming I was to be informed she had written to me. I found her note when I got home.'

Madame de Vionnet listened with interest and with her eyes on Strether's face; then her delicately decorated head had a small melancholy motion. 'She didn't write to *me*. I went to see her,' she added, 'almost immediately after I had seen you, and as I assured her I would do when I met her at Gloriani's. She hadn't then told me she was to be absent, and I felt at her door as if I understood. She's absent —with all respect to her sick friend, though I know indeed she has plenty—so that I may not see her. She doesn't want to meet me again. Well,' she continued with a beautiful conscious mildness, 'I liked and admired her beyond every one in the old time, and she knew it—perhaps that's precisely what has made her go—and I dare say I haven't lost her for ever.' Strether still said nothing; he had a horror, as he now thought of himself, of being in question between women—was in fact already quite enough on his way to that; and there was, moreover, as it came to him, perceptibly, something behind these allusions and professions that, should he take it in, would square but ill with his present resolve to simplify. It was as if, for him, all the

same, her softness and sadness were sincere. He felt that not less when she soon went on: 'I'm extremely glad of her happiness.' But it also left him mute—sharp and fine though the imputation it conveyed. What it conveyed was that *he* was Maria Gostrey's happiness, and for the least little instant he had the impulse to challenge the thought. He could have done so however only by saying, 'What then do you suppose to be between us?' and he was wonderfully glad a moment later not to have spoken. He would rather seem stupid any day than fatuous, and he drew back as well, with a smothered inward shudder, from the consideration of what women—of highly-developed type in particular—might think of each other. Whatever he had come out for he hadn't come to go into that; so that he absolutely took up nothing his interlocutress had now let drop. Yet, though he had kept away from her for days, had laid wholly on herself the burden of their meeting again, she hadn't a gleam of irritation to show him. 'Well, about Jeanne now?' she smiled—it had the gaiety with which she had originally come in. He felt it on the instant to represent her motive and real errand. But he had been schooling her of a truth to say much in proportion to his little. '*Do* you make out that she has a sentiment? I mean for Mr Newsome.'

Almost resentful, Strether could at last be prompt. 'How can I make out such things?'

She remained perfectly good-natured. 'Ah but they're beautiful little things, and you make out—don't pretend!—everything in the world. Haven't you,' she asked, 'been talking with her?'

'Yes, but not about Chad. At least not much.'

'Oh you don't require "much"!' she reassuringly declared. But she immediately changed her ground. 'I hope you remember your promise of the other day.'

'To "save" you, as you called it?'

'I call it so still. You *will*?' she insisted. 'You haven't repented?'

He wondered. 'No—but I've been thinking what I meant.'

She kept it up. 'And not, a little, what *I* did?'

'No—that's not necessary. It will be enough if I know what I meant myself.'

'And don't you know,' she asked, 'by this time?'

Again he had a pause. 'I think you ought to leave it to me. But how long,' he added, 'do you give me?'

'It seems to me much more a question of how long you give *me*. Doesn't our friend here himself, at any rate,' she went on, 'perpetually make me present to you?'

'Not,' Strether replied, 'by ever speaking of you to me.'

'He never does that?'

'Never.'

She considered, and, if the fact was disconcerting to her, effectually concealed it. The next minute indeed she had recovered. 'No, he wouldn't. But do you *need* that?'

Her emphasis was wonderful, and though his eyes had been wandering he looked at her longer now. 'I see what you mean.'

'Of course you see what I mean.'

Her triumph was gentle, and she really had tones to make justice weep. 'I've before me what he owes you.'

'Admit then that that's something,' she said, yet still with the same discretion in her pride.

He took in this note but went straight on. 'You've made of him what I see, but what I don't see is how in the world you've done it.'

'Ah that's another question!' she smiled. 'The point is of what use is your declining to know me when to know Mr Newsome—as you do me the honour to find him—*is* just to know me.'

'I see,' he mused, still with his eyes on her. 'I shouldn't have met you to-night.'

She raised and dropped her linked hands. 'It doesn't matter. If I trust you why can't you a little trust me too? And why can't you also,' she asked in another tone, 'trust yourself?' But she gave him no time to reply. 'Oh I shall be so easy for you! And I'm glad at any rate you've seen my child.'

'I'm glad too,' he said; 'but she does you no good.'

'No good?'—Madame de Vionnet had a clear stare. 'Why, she's an angel of light.'

'That's precisely the reason. Leave her alone. Don't try to find out. I mean,' he explained, 'about what you spoke to me of—the way she feels.'

His companion wondered. 'Because one really won't?'

'Well, because I ask you, as a favour to myself, not to. She's the most charming creature I've ever seen. Therefore don't touch her. Don't know—don't want to know. And moreover—yes—you *won't*.'

It was an appeal, of a sudden, and she took it in. 'As a favour to you?'

'Well—since you ask me.'

'Anything, everything you ask,' she smiled. 'I shan't know then—never. Thank you,' she added with peculiar gentleness as she turned away.

The sound of it lingered with him, making him fairly feel as if he had been tripped up and had a fall. In the very act of arranging with her for his independence he had, under pressure from a particular perception, inconsistently, quite stupidly, committed himself, and, with her subtlety sensitive on the spot to an advantage, she had driven in by a single word a little golden nail, the sharp intention of which he signally felt. He hadn't detached, he had more closely connected himself, and his eyes, as he considered with some intensity this circumstance, met another pair which had just come within their range and which struck him as reflecting his sense of what he had done. He recognised them at the same moment as those of little Bilham, who had apparently drawn near on purpose to speak to him, and little Bilham wasn't, in the conditions, the person to whom his heart would be most closed. They were seated together a minute later at the angle of the room obliquely opposite the corner in which Gloriani was still engaged with Jeanne de Vionnet, to whom at first and in silence their attention had been benevolently given. 'I can't see for my life,' Strether had then observed, 'how a young fellow of any spirit—such a one as you for instance—can be admitted to

the sight of that young lady without being hard hit. Why don't you go in, little Bilham?' He remembered the tone into which he had been betrayed on the garden-bench at the sculptor's reception, and this might make up for that by being much more the right sort of thing to say to a young man worthy of any advice at all. 'There *would* be some reason.'

'Some reason for what?'

'Why for hanging on here.'

'To offer my hand and fortune to Mademoiselle de Vionnet?'

'Well,' Strether asked, 'to what lovelier apparition *could* you offer them? She's the sweetest little thing I've ever seen.'

'She's certainly immense. I mean she's the real thing. I believe the pale pink petals are folded up there for some wondrous efflorescence in time; to open, that is, to some great gold sun. *I'm* unfortunately but a small farthing candle. What chance in such a field for a poor little painter-man?'

'Oh you're good enough,' Strether threw out.

'Certainly I'm good enough. We're good enough, I consider, *nous autres*, for anything. But she's *too* good. There's the difference. They wouldn't look at me.'

Strether, lounging on his divan and still charmed by the young girl, whose eyes had consciously strayed to him, he fancied, with a vague smile—Strether, enjoying the whole occasion as with dormant pulses at last awake and in spite of new material thrust upon him, thought over his companion's words. 'Whom do you mean by "they"? She and her mother?'

'She and her mother. And she had a father too, who, whatever else he may be, certainly can't be indifferent to the possibilities she represents. Besides, there's Chad.'

Strether was silent a little. 'Ah but he doesn't care for her —not, I mean, it appears, after all, in the sense I'm speaking of. He's *not* in love with her.'

'No—but he's her best friend; after her mother. He's

very fond of her. He has his ideas about what can be done for her.'

'Well, it's very strange!' Strether presently remarked with a sighing sense of fullness.

'Very strange indeed. That's just the beauty of it. Isn't it very much the kind of beauty you had in mind,' little Bilham went on, 'when you were so wonderful and so inspiring to me the other day? Didn't you adjure me, in accents I shall never forget, to see, while I've a chance, everything I can?—and *really* to see, for it must have been that only you meant. Well, you did me no end of good, and I'm doing my best. I *do* make it out a situation.'

'So do I!' Strether went on after a moment. But he had the next minute an inconsequent question. 'How comes Chad so mixed up, anyway?'

'Ah, ah, ah!'—and little Bilham fell back on his cushions.

It reminded our friend of Miss Barrace, and he felt again the brush of his sense of moving in a maze of mystic closed allusions. Yet he kept hold of his thread. 'Of course I understand really; only the general transformation makes me occasionally gasp. Chad with such a voice in the settlement of the future of a little countess—no,' he declared, 'it takes more time! You say, moreover,' he resumed, 'that we're inevitably, people like you and me, out of the running. The curious fact remains that Chad himself isn't. The situation doesn't make for it, but in a different one he could have her if he would.'

'Yes, but that's only because he's rich and because there's a possibility of his being richer. They won't think of anything but a great name or a great fortune.'

'Well,' said Strether, 'he'll have no great fortune on *these* lines. He must stir his stumps.'

'Is that,' little Bilham inquired, 'what you were saying to Madame de Vionnet?'

'No—I don't say much to her. Of course, however,' Strether continued, 'he can make sacrifices if he likes.'

Little Bilham had a pause. 'Oh he's not keen for sacrifices; or thinks, that is, possibly, that he has made enough.'

'Well, it *is* virtuous,' his companion observed with some decision.

'That's exactly,' the young man dropped after a moment, 'what I mean.'

It kept Strether himself silent a little. 'I've made it out for myself,' he then went on; 'I've really, within the last half hour, got hold of it. I understand it in short at last; which at first—when you originally spoke to me—I didn't. Nor when Chad originally spoke to me either.'

'Oh,' said little Bilham, 'I don't think that at that time you believed me.'

'Yes—I did; and I believed Chad too. It would have been odious and unmannerly—as well as quite perverse—if I hadn't. What interest have you in deceiving me?'

The young man cast about. 'What interest have *I*?'

'Yes. Chad *might* have. But you?'

'Ah, ah, ah!' little Bilham exclaimed.

It might, on repetition, as a mystification, have irritated our friend a little; but he knew, once more, as we have seen, where he was, and his being proof against everything was only another attestation that he meant to stay there. 'I couldn't, without my own impression, realise. She's a tremendously clever brilliant capable woman, and with an extraordinary charm on top of it all—the charm we surely all of us this evening know what to think of. It isn't every clever brilliant capable woman that has it. In fact it's rare with any woman. So there you are,' Strether proceeded as if not for little Bilham's benefit alone. 'I understand what a relation with such a woman—what such a high fine friendship—may be. It can't be vulgar or coarse, anyway—and that's the point.'

'Yes, that's the point,' said little Bilham. 'It can't be vulgar or coarse. And, bless us and save us, it *isn't!* It's, upon my word, the very finest thing I ever saw in my life, and the most distinguished.'

Strether, from beside him and leaning back with him as he leaned, dropped on him a momentary look which filled a short interval and of which he took no notice. He only

gazed before him with intent participation. 'Of course what it has done for him,' Strether at all events presently pursued, 'of course what it has done for him—that is as to *how* it has so wonderfully worked—isn't a thing I pretend to understand. I've to take it as I find it. There he is.'

'There he is!' little Bilham echoed. 'And it's really and truly she. I don't understand either, even with my longer and closer opportunity. But I'm like you,' he added; 'I can admire and rejoice even when I'm a little in the dark. You see I've watched it for some three years, and especially for this last. He wasn't so bad before it as I seem to have made out that you think——'

'Oh I don't think anything now!' Strether impatiently broke in: 'that is but what I *do* think! I mean that originally, for her to have cared for him——'

'There must have been stuff in him? Oh yes, there was stuff indeed, and much more of it than ever showed, I dare say, at home. Still, you know,' the young man in all fairness developed, 'there was room for her, and that's where she came in. She saw her chance and took it. That's what strikes me as having been so fine. But of course,' he wound up, 'he liked her first.'

'Naturally,' said Strether.

'I mean that they first met somehow and somewhere—I believe in some American house—and she, without in the least then intending it, made her impression. Then with time and opportunity he made his; and after *that* she was as bad as he.'

Strether vaguely took it up. 'As "bad"?'

'She began, that is, to care—to care very much. Alone, and in her horrid position, she found it, when once she had started, an interest. It was, it is, an interest; and it did—it continues to do—a lot for herself as well. So she still cares. She cares in fact,' said little Bilham thoughtfully, 'more.'

Strether's theory that it was none of his business was somehow not damaged by the way he took this. 'More, you mean, than he?' On which his companion looked round at

him, and now for an instant their eyes met. 'More than he?' he repeated.

Little Bilham, for as long, hung fire. 'Will you never tell any one?'

Strether thought. 'Whom should I tell?'

'Why I supposed you reported regularly——'

'To people at home?'—Strether took him up. 'Well, I won't tell them this.'

The young man at last looked away. 'Then she does now care more than he.'

'Oh!' Strether oddly exclaimed.

But his companion immediately met it. 'Haven't you after all had your impression of it? That's how you've got hold of him.'

'Ah but I haven't got hold of him!'

'Oh I say!' But it was all little Bilham said.

'It's at any rate none of my business. I mean,' Strether explained, 'nothing else than getting hold of him is.' It appeared, however, to strike him as his business to add: 'The fact remains nevertheless that she has saved him.'

Little Bilham just waited. 'I thought that was what *you* were to do.'

But Strether had his answer ready. 'I'm speaking—in connexion with her—of his manners and morals, his character and life. I'm speaking of him as a person to deal with and talk with and live with—speaking of him as a social animal.'

'And isn't it as a social animal that you also want him?'

'Certainly; so that it's as if she had saved him *for* us.'

'It strikes you accordingly then,' the young man threw out, 'as for you all to save *her*?'

'Oh for us "all"——!' Strether could but laugh at that. It brought him back, however, to the point he had really wished to make. 'They've accepted their situation—hard as it is. They're not free—at least, she's not; but they take what's left to them. It's a friendship, of a beautiful sort; and that's what makes them so strong. They're straight, they

feel; and they keep each other up. It's doubtless she, however, who, as you yourself have hinted, feels it most.'

Little Bilham appeared to wonder what he had hinted. 'Feels most that they're straight?'

'Well, feels that *she* is, and the strength that comes from it. She keeps *him* up—she keeps the whole thing up. When people are able to it's fine. She's wonderful, wonderful, as Miss Barrace says; and he is, in his way, too; however, as a mere man, he may sometimes rebel and not feel that he finds his account in it. She has simply given him an immense moral lift, and what that can explain is prodigious. That's why I speak of it as a situation. It *is* one, if there ever was.' And Strether, with his head back and his eyes on the ceiling, seemed to lose himself in the vision of it.

His companion attended deeply. 'You state it much better than I could.'

'Oh you see it doesn't concern you.'

Little Bilham considered. 'I thought you said just now that it doesn't concern you either.'

'Well, it doesn't a bit, as Madame de Vionnet's affair. But as we were again saying just now, what did I come out for but to save him?'

'Yes—to remove him.'

'To save him *by* removal; to win him over to *himself* thinking it best he shall take up business—thinking he must immediately do therefore what is necessary to that end.'

'Well,' said little Bilham after a moment, 'you *have* won him over. He does think it best. He has within a day or two again said to me as much.'

'And that,' Strether asked, 'is why you considered that he cares less than she?'

'Cares less for her than she for him? Yes, that's one of the reasons. But other things too have given me the impression. A man, don't you think?' little Bilham presently pursued, '*can't*, in such conditions, care so much as a woman. It takes different conditions to make him, and then perhaps he cares more. Chad,' he wound up, 'has his possible future before him.'

'Are you speaking of his business future?'

'No—on the contrary; of the other, the future of what you so justly call their situation. Monsieur de Vionnet may live for ever.'

'So that they can't marry?'

The young man waited a moment. 'Not being able to marry is all they've with any confidence to look forward to. A woman—a particular woman—may stand that strain. But can a man?' he propounded.

Strether's answer was as prompt as if he had already, for himself, worked it out. 'Not without a very high ideal of conduct. But that's just what we're attributing to Chad. And how, for that matter,' he mused, 'does his going to America diminish the particular strain? Wouldn't it seem rather to add to it?'

'Out of sight out of mind!' his companion laughed. Then more bravely: 'Wouldn't distance lessen the torment?' But before Strether could reply, 'The thing is, you see, Chad ought to marry!' he wound up.

Strether, for a little, appeared to think of it. 'If you talk of torments you don't diminish mine!' he then broke out. The next moment he was on his feet with a question. 'He ought to marry whom?'

Little Bilham rose more slowly. 'Well, some one he *can* —some thoroughly nice girl.'

Strether's eyes, as they stood together, turned again to Jeanne. 'Do you mean *her?*'

His friend made a sudden strange face. 'After being in love with her mother? No.'

'But isn't it exactly your idea that he *isn't* in love with her mother?'

His friend once more had a pause. 'Well, he isn't at any rate with Jeanne.'

'I daresay not.'

'How *can* he be with any other woman?'

'Oh that I admit. But being in love isn't, you know, here' little Bilham spoke in friendly reminder—'thought necessary, in strictness, for marriage.'

'And what torment—to call a torment—can there ever possibly be with a woman like that?' As if from the interest of his own question Strether had gone on without hearing. 'Is it for her to have turned a man out so wonderfully, too, only for somebody else?' He appeared to make a point of this, and little Bilham looked at him now. 'When it's for each other that people give things up they don't miss them.' Then he threw off as with an extravagance of which he was conscious: 'Let them face the future together!'

Little Bilham looked at him indeed. 'You mean that after all he shouldn't go back?'

'I mean that if he gives her up——!'

'Yes?'

'Well, he ought to be ashamed of himself.' But Strether spoke with a sound that might have passed for a laugh.

BOOK SEVENTH

I

IT WASN'T the first time Strether had sat alone in the great dim church—still less was it the first of his giving himself up, so far as conditions permitted, to its beneficent action on his nerves. He had been to Notre Dame with Waymarsh, he had been there with Miss Gostrey, he had been there with Chad Newsome, and had found the place, even in company, such a refuge from the obsession of his problem that, with renewed pressure from that source, he had not unnaturally recurred to a remedy meeting the case, for the moment, so indirectly, no doubt, but so relievingly. He was conscious enough that it was only for the moment, but good moments—if he could call them good—still had their value for a man who by this time struck himself as living almost disgracefully from hand to mouth. Having so well learnt the way, he had lately made the pilgrimage more than once by himself—had quite stolen off, taking an unnoticed chance and making no point of speaking of the adventure when restored to his friends.

His great friend, for that matter, was still absent, as well as remarkably silent; even at the end of three weeks Miss Gostrey hadn't come back. She wrote to him from Mentone, admitting that he must judge her grossly inconsequent—perhaps in fact for the time odiously faithless; but asking for patience, for a deferred sentence throwing herself in short on his generosity. For her too, she could assure him, life was complicated—more complicated than he could have guessed; she had moreover made certain of him—certain of not wholly missing him on her return—before her disappearance. If furthermore she didn't burden him with letters it was frankly because of her sense of the other great

commerce he had to carry on. He himself, at the end of a fortnight, had written twice, to show how his generosity could be trusted; but he reminded himself in each case of Mrs Newsome's epistolary manner at the times when Mrs Newsome kept off delicate ground. He sank his problem, he talked of Waymarsh and Miss Barrace, of little Bilham and the set over the river, with whom he had again had tea, and he was easy, for convenience, about Chad and Madame de Vionnet and Jeanne. He admitted that he continued to see them, he was decidedly so confirmed a haunter of Chad's premises, and that young man's practical intimacy with them was so undeniably great; but he had his reason for not attempting to render for Miss Gostrey's benefit the impression of these last days. That would be to tell her too much about himself—it being at present just from himself he was trying to escape.

This small struggle sprang not a little, in its way, from the same impulse that had now carried him across to Notre Dame; the impulse to let things be, to give them time to justify themselves or at least to pass. He was aware of having no errand in such a place but the desire not to be, for the hour, in certain other places; a sense of safety, of simplification, which each time he yielded to it he amused himself by thinking of as a private concession to cowardice. The great church had no altar for his worship, no direct voice for his soul; but it was none the less soothing even to sanctity; for he could feel while there what he couldn't elsewhere, that he was a plain tired man taking the holiday he had earned. He was tired, but he wasn't plain—that was the pity and the trouble of it; he was able, however, to drop his problem at the door very much as if it had been the copper piece that he deposited, on the threshold, in the receptacle of the inveterate blind beggar. He trod the long dim nave, sat in the splendid choir, paused before the clustered chapels of the east end, and the mighty monument laid upon him its spell. He might have been a student under the charm of a museum—which was exactly what, in a foreign town, in the afternoon of life, he would have liked to be free

to be. This form of sacrifice did at any rate for the occasion as well as another; it made him quite sufficiently understand how, within the precinct, for the real refugee, the things of the world could fall into abeyance. That was the cowardice, probably—to dodge them, to beg the question, not to deal with it in the hard outer light; but his own oblivions were too brief, too vain, to hurt any one but himself, and he had a vague and fanciful kindness for certain persons whom he met, figures of mystery and anxiety, and whom, with observation for his pastime, he ranked as those who were fleeing from justice. Justice was outside, in the hard light, and injustice too; but one was as absent as the other from the air of the long aisles and the brightness of the many altars.

Thus it was, at all events that, one morning some dozen days after the dinner in the Boulevard Malesherbes at which Madame de Vionnet had been present with her daughter, he was called upon to play his part in an encounter that deeply stirred his imagination. He had the habit, in these contemplations, of watching a fellow visitant, here and there, from a respectable distance, remarking some note of behaviour, of penitence, of prostration, of the absolved, relieved state; this was the manner in which his vague tenderness took its course, the degree of demonstration to which it naturally had to confine itself. It hadn't indeed so felt its responsibility as when on this occasion he suddenly measured the suggestive effect of a lady whose supreme stillness, in the shade of one of the chapels, he had two or three times noticed as he made, and made once more, his slow circuit. She wasn't prostrate—not in any degree bowed, but she was strangely fixed, and her prolonged immobility showed her, while he passed, and paused, as wholly given up to the need, whatever it was, that had brought her there. She only sat and gazed before her, as he himself often sat; but she had placed herself, as he never did, within the focus of the shrine, and she had lost herself, he could easily see, as he would only have liked to do. She was not a wandering alien, keeping back more than she

gave, but one of the familiar, the intimate, the fortunate, for whom these dealings had a method and a meaning. She reminded our friend—since it was the way of nine-tenths of his current impressions to act as recalls of things imagined —of some fine firm concentrated heroine of an old story, something he had heard, read, something that, had he had a hand for drama, he might himself have written, renewing her courage, renewing her clearness, in splendidly-protected meditation. Her back, as she sat, was turned to him, but his impression absolutely required that she should be young and interesting, and she carried her head, moreover, even in the sacred shade, with a discernible faith in herself, a kind of implied conviction of consistency, security, impunity. But what had such a woman come for if she hadn't come to pray? Strether's reading of such matters was, it must be owned, confused; but he wondered if her attitude were some congruous fruit of absolution, of 'indulgence'. He knew but dimly what indulgence, in such a place, might mean; yet he had, as with a soft sweep, a vision of how it might indeed add to the zest of active rites. All this was a good deal to have been denoted by a mere lurking figure who was nothing to him; but, the last thing before leaving the church, he had the surprise of a still deeper quickening.

He had dropped upon a seat halfway down the nave and, again in the museum mood, was trying with head thrown back and eyes aloft, to reconstitute a past, to reduce it in fact to the convenient terms of Victor Hugo, whom, a few days before, giving the rein for once in a way to the joy of life, he had purchased in seventy bound volumes, a miracle of cheapness, parted with, he was assured by the shopman, at the price of the red-and-gold alone. He looked, doubtless, while he played his eternal nippers over Gothic glooms, sufficiently rapt in reverence; but what his thought had finally bumped against was the question of where, among packed accumulations, so multiform a wedge would be able to enter. Were seventy volumes in red-and-gold to be perhaps what he should most substantially have to show at Woollett as the fruit of his mission? It was a possibility

that held him a minute—held him till he happened to feel that some one, unnoticed, had approached him and paused. Turning, he saw that a lady stood there as for a greeting, and he sprang up as he next took her, securely, for Madame de Vionnet, who appeared to have recognised him as she passed near him on her way to the door. She checked, quickly and gaily, a certain confusion in him, came to meet it, turned it back, by an art of her own; the confusion having threatened him as he knew her for the person he had lately been observing. She was the lurking figure of the dim chapel; she had occupied him more than she guessed; but it came to him in time, luckily, that he needn't tell her and that no harm, after all, had been done. She herself, for that matter, straightway showed she felt their encounter as the happiest of accidents, had for him a 'You come here too?' that despoiled surprise of every awkwardness.

'I come often,' she said; 'I love this place, but I'm terrible, in general, for churches. The old women who live in them all know me; in fact I'm already myself one of the old women. It's like that, at all events, that I foresee I shall end.' Looking about for a chair, so that he instantly pulled one nearer, she sat down with him again to the sound of an 'Oh, I like so much your also being fond——!'

He confessed the extent of his feeling, though she left the object vague; and he was struck with the tact, the taste of her vagueness, which simply took for granted in him a sense of beautiful things. He was conscious of how much it was affected, this sense, by something subdued and discreet in the way she had arranged herself for her special object and her morning walk—he believed her to have come on foot; the way her slightly thicker veil was drawn—a mere touch, but everything; the composed gravity of her dress, in which, here and there, a dull wine-colour seemed to gleam faintly through black; the charming discretion of her small compact head; the quiet note, as she sat, of her folded, grey-gloved hands. It was, to Strether's mind, as if she sat on her own ground, the light honours of which, at an open gate, she thus easily did him, while all the vastness and mystery of

the domain stretched off behind. When people were so completely in possession they could be extraordinarily civil; and our friend had indeed at this hour a kind of revelation of her heritage. She was romantic for him far beyond what she could have guessed, and again he found his small comfort in the conviction that, subtle though she was, his impression must remain a secret from her. The thing that, once more, made him uneasy for secrets in general was this particular patience she could have with his own want of colour; albeit that on the other hand his uneasiness pretty well dropped after he had been for ten minutes as colourless as possible and at the same time as responsive.

The moments had already, for that matter, drawn their deepest tinge from the special interest excited in him by his vision of his companion's identity with the person whose attitude before the glimmering altar had so impressed him. This attitude fitted admirably into the stand he had privately taken about her connexion with Chad on the last occasion of his seeing them together. It helped him to stick fast at the point he had then reached; it was there he had resolved that he *would* stick, and at no moment since had it seemed as easy to do so. Unassailably innocent was a relation that could make one of the parties to it so carry herself. If it wasn't innocent why did she haunt the churches?—into which, given the woman he could believe he made out, she would never have come to flaunt an insolence of guilt. She haunted them for continued help, for strength, for peace—sublime support which, if one were able to look at it so, she found from day to day. They talked in low easy tones and with lifted lingering looks, about the great monument and its history and its beauty—all of which, Madame de Vionnet professed, came to her most in the other, the outer view. 'We'll presently, after we go,' she said, 'walk round it again if you like. I'm not in a particular hurry, and it will be pleasant to look at it well with you.' He had spoken of the great romancer and the great romance, and of what, to his imagination, they had done for the whole, mentioning to

her moreover the exorbitance of his purchase, the seventy blazing volumes that were so out of proportion.

'Out of proportion to what?'

'Well, to any other plunge.' Yet he felt even as he spoke how at that instant he was plunging. He had made up his mind and was impatient to get into the air; for his purpose was a purpose to be uttered outside, and he had a great fear that it might with delay still slip away from him. She however took her time; she drew out their quiet gossip as if she had wished to profit by their meeting, and this confirmed precisely an interpretation of her manner, of her mystery. While she rose, as he would have called it, to the question of Victor Hugo, her voice itself, the light low quaver of her deference to the solemnity about them, seemed to make her words mean something that they didn't mean openly. Help, strength, peace, a sublime support—she hadn't found so much of these things as that the amount wouldn't be sensibly greater for any scrap his appearance of faith in her might enable her to feel in her hand. Every little, in a long strain, helped, and if he happened to affect her as a firm object she could hold on by, he wouldn't jerk himself out of her reach. People in difficulties held on by what was nearest, and he was perhaps after all not further off than sources of comfort more abstract. It was as to this he had made up his mind; he had made it up, that is, to give her a sign. The sign would be that—though it was her own affair—he understood; the sign would be that—though it was her own affair—she was free to clutch. Since she took him for a firm object—much as he might to his own sense appear at times to rock—he would do his best to *be* one.

The end of it was that half an hour later they were seated together for an early luncheon at a wonderful, a delightful house of entertainment on the left bank—a place of pilgrimage for the knowing, they were both aware, the knowing who came, for its great renown, the homage of restless days, from the other end of the town. Strether had already been there three times—first with Miss Gostrey, then with

Chad, then with Chad again and with Waymarsh and little Bilham, all of whom he had himself sagaciously entertained; and his pleasure was deep now on learning that Madame de Vionnet hadn't yet been initiated. When he had said, as they strolled round the church, by the river, acting at last on what, within, he had made up his mind to, 'Will you, if you have time, come to déjeuner with me somewhere? For instance, if you know it, over there on the other side, which is so easy a walk'—and then had named the place; when he had done this she stopped short as for quick intensity, and yet deep difficulty, of response. She took in the proposal as if it were almost too charming to be true; and there had perhaps never yet been for her companion so unexpected a moment of pride—so fine, so odd a case, at any rate, as his finding himself thus able to offer to a person in such universal possession a new, a rare amusement. She had heard of the happy spot, but she asked him in reply to a further question how in the world he could suppose her to have been there. He supposed himself to have supposed that Chad might have taken her, and she guessed this the next moment, to his no small discomfort.

'Ah, let me explain,' she smiled, 'that I don't go about with him in public; I never have such chances—not having them otherwise—and it's just the sort of thing that, as a quiet creature living in my hole, I adore.' It was more than kind of him to have thought of it—though, frankly, if he asked whether she had time she hadn't a single minute. That however made no difference—she'd throw everything over. Every duty at home, domestic, maternal, social, awaited her; but it was a case for a high line. Her affairs would go to smash, but hadn't one a right to one's snatch of scandal when one was prepared to pay? It was on this pleasant basis of costly disorder, consequently, that they eventually seated themselves, on either side of a small table, at a window adjusted to the busy quay and the shining barge-burdened Seine; where, for an hour, in the matter of letting himself go, of diving deep, Strether was to feel that he had touched bottom. He was to feel many things on this

occasion, and one of the first of them was that he had travelled far since that evening in London, before the theatre, when his dinner with Maria Gostrey, between the pink-shaded candles, had struck him as requiring so many explanations. He had at that time gathered them in, the explanations—he had stored them up; but it was at present as if he had either soared above or sunk below them—he couldn't tell which; he could somehow think of none that didn't seem to leave the appearance of collapse and cynicism easier for him than lucidity. How could he wish it to be lucid for others, for any one, that he, for the hour, saw reasons enough in the mere way the bright clean ordered waterside life came in at the open window?—the mere way Madame de Vionnet, opposite him over their intensely white table-linen, their *omelette aux tomates*, their bottle of straw-coloured Chablis, thanked him for everything almost with the smile of a child, while her grey eyes moved in and out of their talk, back to the quarter of the warm spring air, in which early summer had already begun to throb, and then back again to his face and their human questions.

Their human questions became many before they had done—many more, as one after the other came up, than our friend's free fancy had at all foreseen. The sense he had had before, the sense he had had repeatedly, the sense that the situation was running away with him, had never been so sharp as now; and all the more that he could perfectly put his finger on the moment it had taken the bit in its teeth. That accident had definitely occurred, the other evening, after Chad's dinner; it had occurred, as he fully knew, at the moment when he interposed between this lady and her child, when he suffered himself so to discuss with her a matter closely concerning them that her own subtlety, marked by its significant 'Thank you!' instantly sealed the occasion in her favour. Again he had held off for ten days, but the situation had continued out of hand in spite of that; the fact that it was running so fast being indeed just *why* he had held off. What had come over him as he recognised

her in the nave of the church was that holding off could be but a losing game from the instant she was worked for not only by her subtlety, but by the hand of fate itself. If all the accidents were to fight on her side—and by the actual showing they loomed large—he could only give himself up. This was what he had done in privately deciding then and there to propose she should breakfast with him. What did the success of his proposal in fact resemble but the smash in which a regular runaway probably ends? The smash was their walk, their déjeuner, their omelette, the Chablis, the place, the view, their present talk and his present pleasure in it—to say nothing, wonder of wonders, of her own. To this tune and nothing less, accordingly, was his surrender made good. It sufficiently lighted up at least the folly of holding off. Ancient proverbs sounded, for his memory, in the tone of their words and the clink of their glasses, in the hum of the town and the plash of the river. It *was* clearly better to suffer as a sheep than as a lamb. One might as well perish by the sword as by famine.

'Maria's still away?'—that was the first thing she had asked him; and when he had found the frankness to be cheerful about it in spite of the meaning he knew her to attach to Miss Gostrey's absence, she had gone on to inquire if he didn't tremendously miss her. There were reasons that made him by no means sure, yet he nevertheless answered 'Tremendously'; which she took in as if it were all she had wished to prove. Then, 'A man in trouble *must* be possessed somehow of a woman,' she said; 'if she doesn't come in one way she comes in another.'

'Why do you call me a man in trouble?'

'Ah because that's the way you strike me.' She spoke ever so gently and as with all fear of wounding him while she sat partaking of his bounty. '*Aren't* you in trouble?'

He felt himself colour at the question, and then he hated that—hated to pass for anything so idiotic as woundable. Woundable by Chad's lady, in respect to whom he had come out with such a fund of indifference—was he already at that point? Perversely, none the less, his pause gave a

strange air of truth to her supposition; and what was he in fact but disconcerted at having struck her just in the way he had most dreamed of not doing? 'I'm not in trouble yet,' he at last smiled. 'I'm not in trouble now.'

'Well, I'm always so. But that you sufficiently know.' She was a woman who, between courses, could be graceful with her elbows on the table. It was a posture unknown to Mrs Newsome, but it was easy for a *femme du monde*. 'Yes—I am "now"!'

'There was a question you put to me,' he presently returned, 'the night of Chad's dinner. I didn't answer it then, and it has been very handsome of you not to have sought an occasion for pressing me about it since.'

She was instantly all there. 'Of course I know what you allude to. I asked you what you had meant by saying, the day you came to see me, just before you left me, that you'd save me. And you then said—at our friend's—that you'd have really to wait to see, for yourself, what you did mean.'

'Yes, I asked for time,' said Strether. 'And it sounds now, as you put it, like a very ridiculous speech.'

'Oh!' she murmured—she was full of attenuation. But she had another thought. 'If it does sound ridiculous why do you deny that you're in trouble?'

'Ah if I were,' he replied, 'it wouldn't be the trouble of fearing ridicule. I don't fear it.'

'What then do you?'

'Nothing—now.' And he leaned back in his chair.

'I like your "now"!' she laughed across at him.

'Well, it's precisely that it fully comes to me at present that I've kept you long enough. I know by this time, at any rate, what I meant by my speech; and I really knew it the night of Chad's dinner.'

'Then why didn't you tell me?'

'Because it was difficult at the moment. I had already at that moment done something for you, in the sense of what I had said the day I went to see you; but I wasn't then sure of the importance I might represent this as having.'

She was all eagerness. 'And you're sure now?'

'Yes; I see that, practically, I've done for you—had done for you when you put me your question—all that it's as yet possible to me to do. I feel now,' he went on, 'that it may go further than I thought. What I did after my visit to you,' he explained, 'was to write straight off to Mrs Newsome about you, and I'm at last, from one day to the other, expecting her answer. It's this answer that will represent, as I believe, the consequences.'

Patient and beautiful was her interest. 'I see—the consequences of your speaking for me.' And she waited as if not to hustle him.

He acknowledged it by immediately going on. 'The question, you understand, was *how* I should save you. Well, I'm trying it by thus letting her know that I consider you worth saving.'

'I see—I see.' Her eagerness broke through.

'How can I thank you enough?' He couldn't tell her that, however, and she quickly pursued. 'You do really, for yourself, consider it?'

His only answer at first was to help her to the dish that had been freshly put before them. 'I've written to her again since then—I've left her in no doubt of what I think. I've told her all about you.'

'Thanks—not so much. "All about" me,' she went on—'yes.'

'All it seems to me you've done for him.'

'Ah and you might have added all it seems to *me!*' She laughed again, while she took up her knife and fork, as in the cheer of these assurances. 'But you're not sure how she'll take it.'

'No, I'll not pretend I'm sure.'

'*Voilà.*' And she waited a moment. 'I wish you'd tell me about her.'

'Oh,' said Strether with a slightly strained smile, 'all that need concern you about her is that she's really a grand person.'

Madame de Vionnet seemed to demur. 'Is that all that need concern me about her?'

But Strether neglected the question. 'Hasn't Chad talked to you?'

'Of his mother? Yes a great deal—immensely. But not from your point of view.'

'He can't,' our friend returned, 'have said any ill of her.'

'Not the least bit. He has given me, like you, the assurance that she's really grand. But her being really grand is somehow just what hasn't seemed to simplify our case. Nothing,' she continued, 'is further from me than to wish to say a word against her; but of course I feel how little she can like being told of her owing me anything. No woman ever enjoys such an obligation to another woman.'

This was a proposition Strether couldn't contradict. 'And yet what other way could I have expressed to her what I felt? It's what there was most to say about you.'

'Do you mean then that she *will* be good to me?'

'It's what I'm waiting to see. But I've little doubt she would,' he added, 'if she could comfortably see you.'

It seemed to strike her as a happy, a beneficent thought. 'Oh then couldn't that be managed? Wouldn't she come out? Wouldn't she if you so put it to her? *Did* you by any possibility?' she faintly quavered.

'Oh no'—he was prompt. 'Not that. It would be, much more, to give an account of you that—since there's no question of *your* paying the visit—I should go home first.'

It instantly made her graver. 'And are you thinking of that?'

'Oh all the while, naturally.'

'Stay with us—stay with us!' she exclaimed on this. 'That's your only way to make sure.'

'To make sure of what?'

'Why that he doesn't break up. You didn't come out to do that to him.'

'Doesn't it depend,' Strether returned after a moment, 'on what you mean by breaking up?'

'Oh you know well enough what I mean!'

His silence seemed again for a little to denote an understanding. 'You take for granted remarkable things.'

'Yes, I do—to the extent that I don't take for granted vulgar ones. You're perfectly capable of seeing that what you came out for wasn't really at all to do what you'd now have to do.'

'Ah it's perfectly simple,' Strether good-humouredly pleaded. 'I've had but one thing to do—to put our case before him. To put it as it could only be put here on the spot—by personal pressure. My dear lady,' he lucidly pursued, 'my work, you see, is really done, and my reasons for staying on even another day are none of the best. Chad's in possession of our case and professes to do it full justice. What remains is with himself. I've had my rest, my amusement, and refreshment; I've had, as we say at Woollett, a lovely time. Nothing in it has been more lovely than this happy meeting with you—in these fantastic conditions to which you've so delightfully consented. I've a sense of success. It's what I wanted. My getting all this good is what Chad has waited for, and I gather that if I'm ready to go he's the same.'

She shook her head with a finer deeper wisdom. 'You're not ready. If you're ready why did you write to Mrs Newsome in the sense you've mentioned to me?'

Strether considered. 'I shan't go before I hear from her. You're too much afraid of her,' he added.

It produced between them a long look from which neither shrank. 'I don't think you believe that—believe I've not really reason to fear her.'

'She's capable of great generosity,' Strether presently declared.

'Well then let her trust me a little. That's all I ask. Let her recognise in spite of everything what I've done.'

'Ah remember,' our friend replied, 'that she can't effectually recognise it without seeing it for herself. Let Chad go over and show her what you've done, and let him plead with her there for it and, as it were, for *you*.'

She measured the depth of this suggestion. 'Do you give your word of honour that if she once has him there she won't do her best to marry him?'

It made her companion, this inquiry, look again a while out at the view; after which he spoke without sharpness. 'When she sees for herself what he is——'

But she had already broken in. 'It's when she sees for herself what he is that she'll want to marry him most.'

Strether's attitude, that of due deference to what she said, permitted him to attend for a minute to his luncheon. 'I doubt if that will come off. It won't be easy to make it.'

'It will be easy if he remains there—and he'll remain for the money. The money appears to be, as a probability, so hideously much.'

'Well,' Strether presently concluded, 'nothing *could* really hurt you but his marrying.'

She gave a strange light laugh. 'Putting aside what may really hurt *him*.'

But her friend looked at her as if he had thought of that too. 'The question will come up, of course, of the future that you yourself offer him.'

She was leaning back now, but she fully faced him. 'Well, let it come up!'

'The point is that it's for Chad to make of it what he can. His being proof against marriage will show what he does make.'

'If he *is* proof, yes'—she accepted the proposition. 'But for myself,' she added, 'the question is what *you* make.'

'Ah I make nothing. It's not my affair.'

'I beg your pardon. It's just there that, since you've taken it up and are committed to it, it most intensely becomes yours. You're not saving me, I take it, for your interest in myself, but for your interest in our friend. The one's at any rate wholly dependent on the other. You can't in honour not see me through,' she wound up, 'because you can't in honour not see *him*.'

Strange and beautiful to him was her quiet soft acuteness. The thing that most moved him was really that she was so deeply serious. She had none of the portentous forms of it, but he had never come in contact, it struck him, with a force brought to so fine a head. Mrs Newsome, goodness

knew, was serious; but it was nothing to this. He took it all in, he saw it all together. 'No,' he mused, 'I can't in honour not see him.'

Her face affected him as with an exquisite light. 'You *will* then?'

'I will.'

At this she pushed back her chair and was the next moment on her feet. 'Thank you!' she said with her hand held out to him across the table and with no less a meaning in the words than her lips had so particularly given them after Chad's dinner. The golden nail she had then driven in pierced a good inch deeper. Yet he reflected that he himself had only meanwhile done what he had made up his mind to on the same occasion. So far as the essence of the matter went he had simply stood fast on the spot on which he had then planted his feet.

II

HE RECEIVED three days after this a communication from America, in the form of a scrap of blue paper folded and gummed, not reaching him through his bankers, but delivered at his hotel by a small boy in uniform, who, under instructions from the concierge, approached him as he slowly paced the little court. It was the evening hour, but daylight was long now and Paris more than ever penetrating. The scent of flowers was in the streets, he had the whiff of violets perpetually in his nose; and he had attached himself to sounds and suggestions, vibrations of the air, human and dramatic, he imagined, as they were not in other places, that came out for him more and more as the mild afternoons deepened—a far-off hum, a sharp near click on the asphalt, a voice calling, replying, somewhere and as full of tone as an actor's in a play. He was to dine at home, as usual, with Waymarsh—they had settled to that for thrift and sim-

plicity; and he now hung about before his friend came down.

He read his telegram in the court, standing still a long time where he had opened it and giving five minutes afterwards to the renewed study of it. At last, quickly, he crumpled it up as if to get it out of the way; in spite of which, however, he kept it there—still kept it when, at the end of another turn, he had dropped into a chair placed near a small table. Here, with his scrap of paper compressed in his fist and further concealed by his folding his arms tight, he sat for some time in thought, gazed before him so straight that Waymarsh appeared and approached him without catching his eye. The latter in fact, struck with his appearance, looked at him hard for a single instant and then, as if determined to that course by some special vividness in it, dropped back into the *salon de lecture* without addressing him. But the pilgrim from Milrose permitted himself still to observe the scene from behind the clear glass plate of that retreat. Strether ended, as he sat, by a fresh scrutiny of his compressed missive, which he smoothed out carefully again as he placed it on his table. There it remained for some minutes, until, at last looking up, he saw Waymarsh watching him from within. It was on this that their eyes met—met for a moment during which neither moved. But Strether then got up, folding his telegram more carefully and putting it into his waistcoat pocket.

A few minutes later the friends were seated together at dinner; but Strether had meanwhile said nothing about it, and they eventually parted, after coffee in the court, with nothing said on either side. Our friend had moreover the consciousness that even less than usual was on this occasion said between them, so that it was almost as if each had been waiting for something from the other. Waymarsh had always more or less the air of sitting at the door of his tent, and silence, after so many weeks, had come to play its part in their concert. This note indeed, to Strether's sense, had lately taken a fuller tone, and it was his fancy

to-night that they had never quite so drawn it out. Yet it befell, none the less, that he closed the door to confidence when his companion finally asked him if there were anything particular the matter with him. 'Nothing,' he replied, 'more than usual.'

On the morrow, however, at an early hour, he found occasion to give an answer more in consonance with the facts. What was the matter had continued to be so all the previous evening, the first hours of which, after dinner, in his room, he had devoted to the copious composition of a letter. He had quitted Waymarsh for this purpose, leaving him to his own resources with less ceremony than their wont, but finally coming down again with his letter unconcluded and going forth into the streets without inquiry for his comrade. He had taken a long vague walk, and one o'clock had struck before his return and his re-ascent to his room by the aid of the glimmering candle-end left for him on the shelf outside the porter's lodge. He had possessed himself, on closing his door, of the numerous loose sheets of his unfinished composition, and then, without reading them over, had torn them into small pieces. He had thereupon slept—as if it had been in some measure thanks to that sacrifice—the sleep of the just, and had prolonged his rest considerably beyond his custom. Thus it was that when between nine and ten, the tap of the knob of a walking-stick sounded on his door, he had not yet made himself altogether presentable. Chad Newsome's bright deep voice determined quickly enough none the less the admission of the visitor. The little blue paper of the evening before, plainly an object the more precious for its escape from premature destruction, now lay on the sill of the open window, smoothed out afresh and kept from blowing away by the superincumbent weight of his watch. Chad, looking about with careless and competent criticism, as he looked wherever he went, immediately espied it and permitted himself to fix it for a moment rather hard. After which he turned his eyes to his host. 'It has come then at last?'

Strether paused in the act of pinning his necktie. 'Then you know——? You have had one too?'

'No, I've had nothing, and I only know what I see. I see that thing and I guess. Well,' he added, 'it comes as pat as in a play, for I've precisely turned up this morning—as I would have done yesterday, but it was impossible—to take you.'

'To take me?' Strether had turned again to his glass.

'Back, at last, as I promised. I'm ready—I've really been ready this month. I've only been waiting for you—as was perfectly right. But you're better now; you're safe—I see that for myself; you've got all your good. You're looking, this morning, as fit as a flea.'

Strether, at his glass, finished dressing; consulting that witness moreover on this last question. *Was* he looking preternaturally fit? There was something in it perhaps for Chad's wonderful eye, but he had felt himself for hours rather in pieces. Such a judgment, however, was after all but a contribution to his resolve; it testified unwittingly to his wisdom. He was still firmer, apparently—since it shone in him as a light—than he had flattered himself. His firmness indeed was slightly compromised, as he faced about to his friend, by the way this very personage looked —though the case would of course have been worse hadn't the secret of personal magnificence been at every hour Chad's unfailing possession. There he was in all the pleasant morning freshness of it—strong and sleek and gay, easy and fragrant and fathomless, with happy health in his colour, and pleasant silver in his thick young hair, and the right word for everything on the lips that his clear brownness caused to show as red. He had never struck Strether as personally such a success; it was as if now, for his definite surrender, he had gathered himself vividly together. This, sharply and rather strangely, was the form in which he was to be presented to Woollett. Our friend took him in again—he was always taking him in and yet finding that parts of him still remained out; though even thus his image showed through a mist of other things.

'I've had a cable,' Strether said, 'from your mother.'

'I dare say, my dear man. I hope she's well.'

Strether hesitated. 'No—she's not well, I'm sorry to have to tell you.'

'Ah,' said Chad, 'I must have had the instinct of it. All the more reason then that we should start straight off.'

Strether had now got together hat, gloves and stick, but Chad had dropped on the sofa as if to show where he wished to make his point. He kept observing his companion's things; he might have been judging how quickly they could be packed. He might even have wished to hint that he'd send his own servant to assist. 'What do you mean,' Strether inquired, 'by "straight off"?'

'Oh by one of next week's boats. Everything at this season goes out so light that berths will be easy anywhere.'

Strether had in his hand his telegram, which he had kept there after attaching his watch, and he now offered it to Chad, who, however, with an odd movement, declined to take it. 'Thanks, I'd rather not. Your correspondence with Mother's your own affair. I'm only *with* you both on it, whatever it is.' Strether, at this, while their eyes met, slowly folded the missive and put it in his pocket; after which, before he had spoken again, Chad broke fresh ground. 'Has Miss Gostrey come back?'

But when Strether presently spoke it wasn't in answer. 'It's not, I gather, that your mother's physically ill; her health, on the whole, this spring, seems to have been better than usual. But she's worried, she's anxious, and it appears to have risen within the last few days to a climax. We've tired out, between us, her patience.'

'Oh it isn't *you!*' Chad generously protested.

'I beg your pardon—it *is* me.' Strether was mild and melancholy, but firm. He saw it far away and over his companion's head. 'It's very particularly me.'

'Well then all the more reason. *Marchons, marchons!*' said the young man gaily. His host, however, at this, but continued to stand agaze; and he had the next thing

repeated his question of a moment before. 'Has Miss Gostrey come back?'

'Yes, two days ago.'

'Then you've seen her?'

'No—I'm to see her to-day.' But Strether wouldn't linger now on Miss Gostrey. 'Your mother sends me an ultimatum. If I can't bring you I'm to leave you; I'm to come at any rate myself.'

'Ah but you *can* bring me now,' Chad, from his sofa, reassuringly replied.

Strether had a pause. 'I don't think I understand you. Why was it that, more than a month ago, you put it to me so urgently to let Madame de Vionnet speak for you?'

'"Why"?' Chad considered, but he had it at his fingers' ends. 'Why but because I knew how well she'd do it? It was the way to keep you quiet and, to that extent, do you good. Besides,' he happily and comfortably explained, 'I wanted you really to know her and to get the impression of her—and you see the good that *has* done you.'

'Well,' said Strether, 'the way she has spoken for you, all the same—so far as I've given her a chance—has only made me feel how much she wishes to keep you. If you make nothing of that I don't see why you wanted me to listen to her.'

'Why my dear man,' Chad explained, 'I make everything of it! How can you doubt——?'

'I doubt only because you come to me this morning with your signal to start.'

Chad stared, then gave a laugh. 'And isn't my signal to start just what you've been waiting for?'

Strether debated; he took another turn. 'This last month I've been awaiting, I think, more than anything else, the message I have here.'

'You mean you've been afraid of it?'

'Well, I was doing my business in my own way. And I suppose your present announcement,' Strether went on, 'isn't merely the result of your sense of what I've expected.

Otherwise you wouldn't have put me in relation——' But he paused, pulling up.

At this Chad rose. 'Ah, *her* wanting me to not go has nothing to do with it! It's only because she's afraid—afraid of the way that, over there, I may get caught. But her fear's groundless.'

He had met again his companion's sufficiently searching look. 'Are you tired of her?'

Chad gave him in reply to this, with a movement of the head, the strangest slow smile he had ever had from him. 'Never.'

It had immediately, on Strether's imagination, so deep and soft an effect that our friend could only for the moment keep it before him. 'Never?'

'Never,' Chad obligingly and serenely repeated.

It made his companion take several more steps. 'Then *you're* not afraid?'

'Afraid to go?'

Strether pulled up again. 'Afraid to stay.'

The young man looked brightly amazed. 'You want me now to "stay"?'

'If I don't immediately sail the Pococks will immediately come out. That's what I mean,' said Strether, 'by your mother's ultimatum.'

Chad showed a still livelier, but not an alarmed interest. 'She has turned on Sarah and Jim?'

Strether joined him for an instant in the vision. 'Oh and you may be sure Mamie. *That's* whom she's turning on.'

This also Chad saw—he laughed out. 'Mamie—to corrupt me?'

'Ah,' said Strether, 'she's very charming.'

'So you've already more than once told me. I should like to see her.'

Something happy and easy, something above all unconscious, in the way he said this, brought home again to his companion the facility of his attitude and the enviability of his stare. 'See her then by all means. And consider

too,' Strether went on, 'that you really give your sister a lift in letting her come to you. You give her a couple of months of Paris, which she hasn't seen, if I'm not mistaken, since just after she was married, and which I'm sure she wants but the pretext to visit.'

Chad listened, but with all his own knowledge of the world. 'She has had it, the pretext, these several years, yet she has never taken it.'

'Do you mean *you*?' Strether after an instant inquired.

'Certainly—the lone exile. And whom do you mean?' said Chad.

'Oh I mean *me*. I'm her pretext. That is—for it comes to the same thing—I'm your mother's.'

'Then why,' Chad asked, 'doesn't Mother come herself?'

His friend gave him a long look. 'Should you like her to?' And as he for the moment said nothing: 'It's perfectly open to you to cable for her.'

Chad continued to think. 'Will she come if I do?'

'Quite possibly. But try, and you'll see.'

'Why don't *you* try?' Chad after a moment asked.

'Because I don't want to.'

Chad thought. 'Don't desire her presence here?'

Strether faced the question, and his answer was the more emphatic. 'Don't put it off, my dear boy, on *me!*'

'Well—I see what you mean. I'm sure you'd behave beautifully, but you *don't* want to see her. So I won't play you that trick.'

'Ah,' Strether declared, 'I shouldn't call it a trick. You've a perfect right, and it would be perfectly straight of you.' Then he added in a different tone: 'You'd have moreover, in the person of Madame de Vionnet, a very interesting relation prepared for her.'

Their eyes, on this proposition, continued to meet, but Chad's, pleasant and bold, never flinched for a moment. He got up at last and he said something with which Strether was struck. 'She wouldn't understand her, but that makes no difference. Madame de Vionnet would like

to see her. She'd like to be charming to her. She believes she could work it.'

Strether thought a moment, affected by this, but finally turning away. 'She couldn't!'

'You're quite sure?' Chad asked.

'Well, risk it if you like!'

Strether, who uttered this with serenity, had urged a plea for their now getting into the air; but the young man still waited. 'Have you sent your answer?'

'No, I've done nothing yet.'

'Were you waiting to see me?'

'No, not that.'

'Only waiting'—and Chad, with this, had a smile for him—'to see Miss Gostrey?'

'No—not even Miss Gostrey. I wasn't waiting to see any one. I had only waited, till now, to make up my mind —in complete solitude; and, since I of course absolutely owe you the information, was on the point of going out with it quite made up. Have therefore a little more patience with me. Remember,' Strether went on, 'that that's what you originally asked *me* to have. I've had it, you see, and you see what has come of it. Stay on with me.'

Chad looked grave. 'How much longer?'

'Well, till I make you a sign. I can't myself, you know, at the best, or the worst, stay for ever. Let the Pococks come,' Strether repeated.

'Because it gains you time?'

'Yes—it gains me time.'

Chad, as if it still puzzled him, waited a minute. 'You don't want to get back to Mother?'

'Not just yet. I'm not ready.'

'You feel,' Chad asked in a tone of his own, 'the charm of life over here?'

'Immensely.' Strether faced it. 'You've helped me so to feel it that that surely needn't surprise you.'

'No, it doesn't surprise me, and I'm delighted. But what, my dear man,' Chad went on with conscious queerness, 'does it all lead to for you?'

The change of position and of relation, for each, was as oddly betrayed in the question that Chad laughed out as soon as he had uttered it—which made Strether also laugh. 'Well, to my having a certitude that has been tested—that has passed through the fire. But oh,' he couldn't help breaking out, 'if within my first month here you had been willing to move with me——!'

'Well?' said Chad, while he broke down as for weight of thought.

'Well, we should have been over there by now.'

'Ah but you wouldn't have had your fun!'

'I should have had a month of it; and I'm having now, if you want to know,' Strether continued, 'enough to last me for the rest of my days.'

Chad looked amused and interested, yet still somewhat in the dark; partly perhaps because Strether's estimate of fun had required of him from the first a good deal of elucidation. 'It wouldn't do if I left you——?'

'Left me?' Strether remained blank.

'Only for a month or two—time to go and come. Madame de Vionnet,' Chad smiled, 'would look after you in the interval.'

'To go back by yourself, I remaining here?' Again for an instant their eyes had the question out; after which Strether said: 'Grotesque!'

'But I want to see Mother,' Chad presently returned. 'Remember how long it is since I've seen Mother.'

'Long indeed; and that's exactly why I was originally so keen for moving you. Hadn't you shown us enough how beautifully you could do without it—'

'Oh but,' said Chad wonderfully, 'I'm better now.'

There was an easy triumph in it that made his friend laugh out again. 'Oh if you were worse I *should* know what to do with you. In that case I believe I'd have you gagged and strapped down, carried on board resisting, kicking. How *much*,' Strether asked, 'do you want to see Mother?'

'How much?' Chad seemed to find it in fact difficult to say.

'How much.'

'Why as much as you've made me. I'd give anything to see her. And you've left me,' Chad went on, 'in little enough doubt as to how much *she* wants it.'

Strether thought a minute. 'Well then if those things are really your motive catch the French steamer and sail to-morrow. Of course, when it comes to that, you're absolutely free to do as you choose. From the moment you can't hold yourself I can only accept your flight.'

'I'll fly in a minute then,' said Chad, 'if you'll stay here.'

'I'll stay here till the next steamer—then I'll follow you.'

'And do you call that,' Chad asked, 'accepting my flight?'

'Certainly—it's the only thing to call it. The only way to keep me here, accordingly,' Strether explained, 'is by staying yourself.'

Chad took it in. 'All the more that I've really dished you, eh?'

'Dished me?' Strether echoed as inexpressibly as possible.

'Why if she sends out the Pococks it will be that she doesn't trust you, and if she doesn't trust you, that bears upon—well you know what.'

Strether decided after a moment that he did know what and in consonance with this he spoke. 'You see then all the more what you owe me.'

'Well, if I do see, how can I pay?'

'By not deserting me. By standing by me.'

'Oh I say——!' But Chad, as they went downstairs, clapped a firm hand, in the manner of a pledge, upon his shoulder. They descended slowly together and had, in the court of the hotel, some further talk, of which the upshot was that they presently separated. Chad Newsome departed, and Strether, left alone, looked about, superficially, for Waymarsh. But Waymarsh hadn't yet, it appeared, come

down, and our friend finally went forth without a sight of him.

III

AT FOUR o'clock that afternoon he had still not seen him, but he was then, as to make up for this, engaged in talk about him with Miss Gostrey. Strether had kept away from home all day, given himself up to the town and to his thoughts, wandered and mused, been at once restless and absorbed—and all with the present climax of a rich little welcome to the Quartier Marboeuf. 'Waymarsh has been, "unbeknown" to me, I'm convinced'—for Miss Gostrey had inquired—'in communication with Woollett: the consequence of which was, last night, the loudest possible call for me.'

'Do you mean a letter to bring you home?'

'No—a cable, which I have at this moment in my pocket: a "Come back by the first ship".'

Strether's hostess, it might have been made out, just escaped changing colour. Reflexion arrived but in time and established a provisional serenity. It was perhaps exactly this that enabled her to say with duplicity: 'And you're going——?'

'You almost deserve it when you abandon me so.'

She shook her head as if this were not worth taking up. 'My absence has helped you—as I've only to look at you to see. It was my calculation, and I'm justified. You're not where you were. And the thing,' she smiled, 'was for me not to be there either. You can go of yourself.'

'Oh but I feel to-day,' he comfortably declared, 'that I shall want you yet.'

She took him all in again. 'Well, I promise you not again to leave you, but it will only be to follow you. You've got your momentum and can toddle alone.'

He intelligently accepted it. 'Yes—I suppose I can

toddle. It's the sight of that in fact that has upset Waymarsh. He can bear it—the way I strike him as going—no longer. That's only the climax of his original feeling. He wants me to quit; and he must have written to Woollett that I'm in peril of perdition.'

'Ah good!' she murmured. 'But is it only your supposition?'

'I make it out—it explains.'

'Then he denies?—or haven't you asked him?'

'I've not had time,' Strether said. 'I made it out but last night, putting various things together, and I've not been since then face to face with him.'

She wondered. 'Because you're too disgusted? You can't trust yourself?'

He settled his glasses on his nose. 'Do I look in a great rage?'

'You look divine!'

'There's nothing,' he went on, 'to be angry about. He has done me on the contrary a service.'

She made it out. 'By bringing things to a head?'

'How well you understand!' he almost groaned. 'Waymarsh won't in the least, at any rate, when I have it out with him, deny or extenuate. He has acted from the deepest conviction, with the best conscience and after wakeful nights. He'll recognise that he's fully responsible, and will consider that he has been highly successful; so that any discussion we may have will bring us quite together again—bridge the dark stream that has kept us so thoroughly apart. We shall have at last, in the consequences of his act, something we can definitely talk about.'

She was silent a little. 'How wonderfully you take it! But you're always wonderful.'

He had a pause that matched her own; then he had, with an adequate spirit, a complete admission. 'It's quite true. I'm extremely wonderful just now. I dare say in fact I'm quite fantastic, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if I were mad.'

'Then tell me!' she earnestly pressed. As he, however, for the time answered nothing, only returning the look with which she watched him, she presented herself where it was easier to meet her. 'What will Mr Waymarsh exactly have done?'

'Simply have written a letter. One will have been quite enough. He has told them I want looking after.'

'And *do* you?'—she was all interest.

'Immensely. And I shall get it.'

'By which you mean you don't budge?'

'I don't budge.'

'You've cabled?'

'No. I've made Chad do it.'

'That you decline to come?'

'That *he* declines. We had it out this morning and I brought him round. He had come in, before I was down, to tell me he was ready—ready, I mean, to return. And he went off, after ten minutes with me, to say he wouldn't.'

Miss Gostrey followed with intensity. 'Then you've *stopped* him?'

Strether settled himself afresh in his chair. 'I've stopped him. That is for the time. That'—he gave it to her more vividly—'is where I am.'

'I see, I see. But where's Mr Newsome? He was ready,' she asked, 'to go?'

'All ready.'

'And sincerely—believing *you'd* be?'

'Perfectly, I think; so that he was amazed to find the hand I had laid on him to pull him over suddenly converted into an engine for keeping him still.'

It was an account of the matter Miss Gostrey could weigh. 'Does he think the conversion sudden?'

'Well,' said Strether, 'I'm not altogether sure what he thinks. I'm not sure of anything that concerns him, except that the more I've seen of him the less I've found him what I originally expected. He's obscure, and that's why I'm waiting.'

She wondered. 'But for what in particular?'

'For the answer to his cable.'

'And what was his cable?'

'I don't know,' Strether replied; 'it was to be, when he left me, according to his own taste. I simply said to him: "I want to stay, and the only way for me to do so is for *you* to." That I wanted to stay seemed to interest him, and he acted on that.'

Miss Gostrey turned it over. 'He wants then himself to stay?'

'He half wants it. That is he half wants to go. My original appeal has to that extent worked in him. Nevertheless,' Strether pursued, 'he won't go. Not, at least, so long as I'm here.'

'But you can't,' his companion suggested, 'stay here always. I wish you could.'

'By no means. Still, I want to see him a little further. He's not in the least the case I supposed; he's quite another case. And it's as such that he interests me.' It was almost as if for his own intelligence that, deliberate and lucid, our friend thus expressed the matter 'I don't want to give him up.'

Miss Gostrey but desired to help his lucidity. She had, however, to be light and tactful. 'Up, you mean—a—to his mother?'

'Well, I'm not thinking of his mother now. I'm thinking of the plan of which I was the mouthpiece, which, as soon as we met, I put before him as persuasively as I knew how, and which was drawn up, as it were, in complete ignorance of all that, in this last long period, has been happening to him. It took no account whatever of the impressions I was here on the spot immediately to begin to receive from him—impressions of which I feel sure I'm far from having had the last.'

Miss Gostrey had a smile of the most genial criticism. 'So your idea is—more or less—to stay out of curiosity?'

'Call it what you like! I don't care what it's called——'

'So long as you do stay? Certainly not then. I call it, all the same, immense fun,' Maria Gostrey declared; 'and

to see you work it out will be one of the sensations of my life. It *is* clear you can toddle alone!'

He received this tribute without elation. 'I shan't be alone when the Pococks have come.'

Her eyebrows went up. 'The Pococks are coming?'

'That, I mean, is what will happen—and happen as quickly as possible—in consequence of Chad's cable. They'll simply embark. Sarah will come to speak for her mother—with an effect different from *my* muddle.'

Miss Gostrey more gravely wondered. '*She* then will take him back?'

'Very possibly—and we shall see. She must at any rate have the chance, and she may be trusted to do all she can.'

'And do you *want* that?'

'Of course,' said Strether, 'I want it. I want to play fair.'

But she had lost for a moment the thread. 'If it devolves on the Pococks why do you stay?'

'Just to see that I *do* play fair—and a little also, no doubt, that they do.' Strether was luminous as he had never been. 'I came out to find myself in presence of new facts—facts that have kept striking me as less and less met by our old reasons. The matter's perfectly simple. New reasons—reasons as new as the facts themselves—are wanted; and of this our friends at Woollett—Chad's and mine—were at the earliest moment definitely notified. If any are producible Mrs Pocock will produce them; she'll bring over the whole collection. They'll be,' he added with a pensive smile, 'a part of the "fun" you speak of.'

She was quite in the current now and floating by his side. 'It's Mamie—so far as I've had it from you—who'll be their great card.' And then as his contemplative silence wasn't a denial she significantly added: 'I think I'm sorry for her.'

'I think *I* am!'—and Strether sprang up, moving about a little as her eyes followed him. 'But it can't be helped.'

'You mean her coming out can't be?'

He explained after another turn what he meant. 'The only way for her not to come is for me to go home—as

I believe that on the spot I could prevent it. But the difficulty as to that is that if I do go home——'

'I see, I see'—she had easily understood. 'Mr Newsome will do the same, and that's not'—she laughed out now—'to be thought of.'

Strether had no laugh; he had only a quiet comparatively placid look that might have shown him as proof against ridicule. 'Strange, isn't it?'

They had, in the matter that had so much interested them, come so far as this without sounding another name —to which however their present momentary silence was full of a conscious reference. Strether's question was a sufficient implication of the weight it had gained with him during the absence of his hostess; and just for that reason a single gesture from her could pass for him as a vivid answer. Yet he was answered still better when she said in a moment: 'Will Mr Newsome introduce his sister——?'

'To Madame de Vionnet?' Strether spoke the name at last. 'I shall be greatly surprised if he doesn't.'

She seemed to gaze at the possibility. 'You mean you've thought of it, and you're prepared.'

'I've thought of it and I'm prepared.'

It was to her visitor now that she applied her consideration. '*Bon!* You are magnificent!'

'Well,' he answered after a pause and a little wearily, but still standing there before her—'well, that's what, just once in all my dull days, I think I shall like to have been!'

Two days later he had news from Chad of a communication from Woollett in response to their determinant telegram, this missive being addressed to Chad himself and announcing the immediate departure for France of Sarah and Jim and Mamie. Strether had meanwhile on his own side cabled; he had but delayed that act till after his visit to Miss Gostrey, an interview by which, as so often before, he felt his sense of things cleared up and settled. His message to Mrs Newsome, in answer to her

own, had consisted of the words: 'Judge best to take another month, but with full appreciation of all re-enforcements.' He had added that he was writing, but he was of course always writing; it was a practice that continued, oddly enough, to relieve him, to make him come nearer than anything else to the consciousness of doing something: so that he often wondered if he hadn't really, under his recent stress, acquired some hollow trick, one of the specious arts of make-believe. Wouldn't the pages he still so frequently dispatched by the American post have been worthy of a showy journalist, some master of the great new science of bearing the sense out of words? Wasn't he writing against time, and mainly to show he was kind?—since it had become quite his habit not to like to read himself over. On those lines he could still be liberal, yet it was at best a sort of whistling in the dark. It was unmistakable moreover that the sense of being in the dark now pressed on him more sharply—creating thereby the need for a louder and livelier whistle. He whistled long and hard after sending his message; he whistled again and again in celebration of Chad's news; there was an interval of a fortnight in which this exercise helped him. He had no great notion of what, on the spot, Sarah Pocock would have to say, though he had indeed confused premonitions; but it shouldn't be in her power to say—it shouldn't be in any one's anywhere to say—that he was neglecting her mother. He might have written before more freely, but he had never written more copiously; and he frankly gave for a reason at Woollett that he wished to fill the void created by Sarah's departure.

The increase of his darkness, however, and the quickening, as I have called it, of his tune, resided in the fact that he was hearing almost nothing. He had for some time been aware that he was hearing less than before, but he was now clearly following a process by which Mrs Newsome's letters could but logically stop. He hadn't had a line for many days, and he needed no proof—though he was, in time, to have plenty—that she wouldn't have put

pen to paper after receiving the hint that had determined her telegram. She wouldn't write till Sarah should have seen him and reported on him. It was strange, though it might well be less so than his own behaviour appeared at Woollett. It was at any rate significant, and what *was* remarkable was the way his friend's nature and manner put on for him, through this very drop of demonstration, a greater intensity. It struck him really that he had never so lived with her as during this period of her silence; the silence was a sacred hush, a finer clearer medium, in which her idiosyncrasies showed. He walked about with her, sat with her, drove with her and dined face to face with her—a rare treat 'in his life', as he could perhaps have scarce escaped phrasing it; and if he had never seen her so soundless he had never, on the other hand, felt her so highly, so almost austerely, herself: pure and by the vulgar estimate 'cold', but deep devoted delicate sensitive noble. Her vividness in these respects became for him, in the special conditions, almost an obsession; and though the obsession sharpened his pulses, adding really to the excitement of life, there were hours at which, to be less on the stretch, he directly sought forgetfulness. He knew it for the queerest of adventures—a circumstance capable of playing such a part only for Lambert Strether—that in Paris itself, of all places, he should find this ghost of the lady of Woollett more importunate than any other presence.

When he went back to Maria Gostrey it was for the change to something else. And yet after all the change scarcely operated, for he talked to her of Mrs Newsome in these days as he had never talked before. He had hitherto observed in that particular a discretion and a law; considerations that at present broke down quite as if relations had altered. They hadn't *really* altered, he said to himself, so much as that came to; for if what had occurred was of course that Mrs Newsome had ceased to trust him, there was nothing on the other hand to prove that he shouldn't win back her confidence. It was quite his present theory that he would leave no stone unturned to do so;

and in fact if he now told Maria things about her that he had never told before this was largely because it kept before him the idea of the honour of such a woman's esteem. His relation with Maria as well was, strangely enough, no longer quite the same; this truth—though not too disconcertingly—had come up between them on the renewal of their meetings. It was all contained in what she had then almost immediately said to him; it was represented by the remark she had needed but ten minutes to make and that he hadn't been disposed to gainsay. He could toddle alone, and the difference that showed was extraordinary. The turn taken by their walk had promptly confirmed this difference; his larger confidence on the score of Mrs Newsome did the rest; and the time seemed already far off when he had held out his small thirsty cup to the spout of her pail. Her pail was scarce touched now, and other fountains had flowed for him; she fell into her place as but one of his tributaries; and there was a strange sweetness—a melancholy mildness that touched him—in her acceptance of the altered order.

It marked for himself the flight of time, or at any rate what he was pleased to think of with irony and pity as the rush of experience; it having been but the day before yesterday that he sat at her feet and held on by her garment and was fed by her hand. It was the proportions that were changed, and the proportions were at all times, he philosophised, the very conditions of perception, the terms of thought. It was as if, with her effective little entresol and her wide acquaintance, her activities, varieties, promiscuities, the duties and devotions that took nine-tenths of her time and of which he got, guardedly, but the side-wind—it was as if she had shrunk to a secondary element and had consented to the shrinkage with the perfection of tact. This perfection had never failed her; it had originally been greater than his prime measure for it; it had kept him quite apart, kept him out of the shop, as she called her huge general acquaintance, made their commerce as quiet, as much a thing of the home alone—

the opposite of the shop—as if she had never another customer. She had been wonderful to him at first, with the memory of her little entresol, the image to which, on most mornings at that time, his eyes directly opened; but now she mainly figured for him as but part of the bristling total—though of course always as a person to whom he should never cease to be indebted. It would never be given to him certainly to inspire a greater kindness. She had decked him out for others, and he saw at this point at least nothing she would ever ask for. She only wondered and questioned and listened, rendering him the homage of a wistful speculation. She expressed it repeatedly; he was already far beyond her, and she must prepare herself to lose him. There was but one little chance for her.

Often as she had said it he met it—for it was a touch he liked—each time the same way. 'My coming to grief?'

'Yes—then I might patch you up.'

'Oh for my real smash, if it takes place, there will be no patching.'

'But you surely don't mean it will kill you.'

'No—worse. It will make me old.'

'Ah nothing can do that! The wonderful and special thing about you is that you *are*, at this time of day, youth.' Then she always made, further, one of those remarks that she had completely ceased to adorn with hesitations or apologies, and that had, by the same token, in spite of their extreme straightness, ceased to produce in Strether the least embarrassment. She made him believe them, and they became thereby as impersonal as truth itself. 'It's just your particular charm.'

His answer too was always the same. 'Of course I'm youth—youth for the trip to Europe. I began to be young, or at least to get the benefit of it, the moment I met you at Chester, and that's what has been taking place ever since. I never had the benefit at the proper time—which comes to saying that I never had the thing itself. I'm having the benefit at this moment; I had it the other day when I said to Chad "Wait"; I shall have it still again

when Sarah Pocock arrives. It's a benefit that would make a poor show for many people; and I don't know who else but you and I, frankly, could begin to see in it what I feel. I don't get drunk; I don't pursue the ladies; I don't spend money; I don't even write sonnets. But nevertheless I'm making up late for what I didn't have early. I cultivate my little benefit in my own little way. It amuses me more than anything that has happened to me in all my life. They may say what they like—it's my surrender, it's my tribute, to youth. One puts that in where one can—it has to come in somewhere, if only out of the lives, the conditions, the feelings of other persons. Chad gives me the sense of it, for all his grey hairs, which merely make it solid in him and safe and serene; and *she* does the same, for all her being older than he, for all her marriageable daughter, her separated husband, her agitated history. Though they're young enough, my pair, I don't say they're, in the freshest way, their *own* absolutely prime adolescence; for that has nothing to do with it. The point is that they're mine. Yes, they're my youth; since somehow at the right time nothing else ever was. What I meant just now therefore is that it would all go—go before doing its work—if they were to fail me.'

On which, just here, Miss Gostrey inveterately questioned. 'What do you, in particular, call its work?'

'Well, to see me through.'

'But through what?'—she liked to get it all out of him.

'Why through this experience.' That was all that would come.

It regularly gave her none the less the last word. 'Don't you remember how in those first days of our meeting it was *I* who was to see you through?'

'Remember? Tenderly, deeply'—he always rose to it. 'You're just doing your part in letting me maunder to you thus.'

'Ah don't speak as if my part were small; since whatever else fails you——'

'*You* won't, ever, ever, ever?'—he thus took her up.

'Oh I beg your pardon; you necessarily, you inevitably *will*. Your conditions—that's what I mean—won't allow me anything to do for you.'

'Let alone—I see what you mean—that I'm drearily, dreadfully old. I *am*, but there's a service—possible for you to render—that I know, all the same, I shall think of.'

'And what will it be?'

This, in fine, however, she would never tell him. 'You shall hear only if your smash takes place. As that's really out of the question, I won't expose myself'—a point at which, for reasons of his own, Strether ceased to press.

He came round, for publicity—it was the easiest thing—to the idea that his smash *was* out of the question, and this rendered idle the discussion of what might follow it. He attached an added importance, as the days elapsed, to the arrival of the Pococks; he had even a shameful sense of waiting for it insincerely and incorrectly. He accused himself of making believe to his own mind that Sarah's presence, her impression, her judgment would simplify and harmonise; he accused himself of being so afraid of what they *might* do that he sought refuge, to beg the whole question, in a vain fury. He had abundantly seen at home what they were in the habit of doing, and he had not at present the smallest ground. His clearest vision was when he made out that what he most desired was an account more full and free of Mrs Newsome's state of mind than any he felt he could now expect from herself; that calculation at least went hand in hand with the sharp consciousness of wishing to prove to himself that he was not afraid to look his behaviour in the face. If he was by an inexorable logic to pay for it he was literally impatient to know the cost, and he held himself ready to pay in instalments. The first instalment would be precisely this entertainment of Sarah; as a consequence of which moreover, he should know vastly better how he stood.

BOOK EIGHTH

I

STRETHER RAMBLED largely alone during these few days, the effect of the incident of the previous week having been to simplify in a marked fashion his mixed relations with Waymarsh. Nothing had passed between them in reference to Mrs Newsome's summons but that our friend had mentioned to his own the departure of the deputation actually at sea—giving him thus an opportunity to confess to the occult intervention he imputed to him. Waymarsh however in the event confessed to nothing; and though this falsified in some degree Strether's forecast the latter amusedly saw in it the same depth of good conscience out of which the dear man's impertinence had originally sprung. He was patient with the dear man now and delighted to observe how unmistakably he had put on flesh; he felt his own holiday so successfully large and free that he was full of allowances and charities in respect to those cabined and confined; his instinct toward a spirit so strapped down as Waymarsh's was to walk round it on tiptoe for fear of waking it up to a sense of losses by this time irretrievable. It was all very funny, he knew, and but the difference, as he often said to himself, of tweedledum and tweedledee—an emancipation so purely comparative that it was like the advance of the door-mat on the scraper; yet the present crisis was happily to profit by it and the pilgrim from Milrose to know himself more than ever in the right.

Strether felt that when he heard of the approach of the Pococks the impulse of pity quite sprang up in him beside the impulse of triumph. That was exactly why Waymarsh had looked at him with eyes in which the heat of justice

was measured and shaded. He had looked very hard, as if affectionately sorry for the friend—the friend of fifty-five—whose frivolity had had thus to be recorded; becoming however, but obscurely sententious and leaving his companion to formulate a charge. It was in this general attitude that he had of late altogether taken refuge; with the drop of discussion they were solemnly sadly superficial; Strether recognised in him the mere portentous rumination to which Miss Barrace had so good-humouredly described herself as assigning a corner of her salon. It was quite as if he knew his surreptitious step had been divined, and it was also as if he missed the chance to explain the purity of his motive; but this privation of relief should be precisely his small penance: it was not amiss for Strether that he should find himself to that degree uneasy. If he had been challenged or accused, rebuked for meddling or otherwise pulled up, he would probably have shown, on his own system, all the height of his consistency, all the depth of his good faith. Explicit resentment of his course would have made him take the floor, and the thump of his fist on the table would have affirmed him as consciously incorruptible. Had what now really prevailed with Strether been but a dread of that thump—a dread of wincing a little painfully at what it might invidiously demonstrate? However this might be, at any rate, one of the marks of the crisis was a visible, a studied lapse, in Waymarsh, of betrayed concern. As if to make up to his comrade for the stroke by which he had played providence he now conspicuously ignored his movements, withdrew himself from the pretension to share them, stiffened up his sensibility to neglect, and, clasping his large empty hands and swinging his large restless foot, clearly looked to another quarter for justice.

This made for independence on Strether's part, and he had in truth at no moment of his stay been so free to go and come. The early summer brushed the picture over and blurred everything but the near; it made a vast warm fragrant medium in which the elements floated together on the best of terms, in which rewards were immediate and

reckonings postponed. Chad was out of town again, for the first time since his visitor's first view of him; he had explained this necessity—without detail, yet also without embarrassment; the circumstance was one of those which, in the young man's life, testified to the variety of his ties. Strether wasn't otherwise concerned with it than for its so testifying—a pleasant multitudinous image in which he took comfort. He took comfort, by the same stroke, in the swing of Chad's pendulum back from that other swing, the sharp jerk towards Woollett, so stayed by his own hand. He had the entertainment of thinking that if he had for that moment stopped the clock it was to promote the next minute this still livelier action. He himself did what he hadn't done before; he took two or three times whole days off—irrespective of others, of two or three taken with Miss Gostrey, two or three taken with little Bilham: he went to Chartres and cultivated, before the front of the cathedral, a general easy beatitude; he went to Fontainebleau and imagined himself on the way to Italy; he went to Rouen with a little handbag and inordinately spent the night.

One afternoon he did something quite different; finding himself in the neighbourhood of a fine old house across the river, he passed under the great arch of its doorway and asked at the porter's lodge for Madame de Vionnet. He had already hovered more than once about that possibility, been aware of it, in the course of ostensible strolls, as lurking but round the corner. Only it had perversely happened, after his morning at Notre Dame, that his consistency, as he considered and intended it, had come back to him; whereby he had reflected that the encounter in question had been none of his making, clinging again intensely to the strength of his position, which was precisely that there was nothing in it for himself. From the moment he actively pursued the charming associate of his adventure, from that moment his position weakened, for he was then acting in an interested way. It was only within a few days that he had fixed himself a limit: he promised himself his consistency should end with Sarah's arrival. It was arguing correctly to

feel the title to a free hand conferred on him by this event. If he wasn't to be let alone he should be merely a dupe to act with delicacy. If he wasn't to be trusted he could at least take his ease. If he was to be placed under control he gained leave to try what his position *might* agreeably give him. An ideal rigour would perhaps postpone the trial till after the Pococks had shown their spirit; and it was to an ideal rigour that he had quite promised himself to conform.

Suddenly, however, on this particular day, he felt a particular fear under which everything collapsed. He knew abruptly that he was afraid of himself—and yet not in relation to the effect on his sensibilities of another hour of Madame de Vionnet. What he dreaded was the effect of a single hour of Sarah Pocock, as to whom he was visited, in troubled nights, with fantastic waking dreams. She loomed at him larger than life; she increased in volume as she drew nearer; she so met his eyes that, his imagination taking, after the first step, all, and more than all, the strides, he already felt her come down on him, already burned, under her reprobation, with the blush of guilt, already consented, by way of penance, to the instant forfeiture of everything. He saw himself under her direction, recommitted to Woollett as juvenile offenders are committed to reformatories. It wasn't of course that Woollett was really a place of discipline; but he knew in advance that Sarah's salon at the hotel would be. His danger, at any rate in such moods of alarm, was some concession, on this ground, that would involve a sharp rupture with the actual; therefore if he waited to take leave of that actual he might wholly miss his chance. It was represented with supreme vividness by Madame de Vionnet, and that is why, in a word, he waited no longer. He had seen in a flash that he must anticipate Mrs Pocock. He was accordingly much disappointed on now learning from the portress that the lady of his quest was not in Paris. She had gone for some days to the country. There was nothing in this accident but what was natural; yet it produced for poor Strether a drop of all confidence. It was suddenly as if he should never see her again and as if

moreover he had brought it on himself by not having been quite kind to her.

It was the advantage of his having let his fancy lose itself for a little in the gloom that, as by reaction, the prospect began really to brighten from the moment the deputation from Woollett alighted on the platform of the station. They had come straight from Havre, having sailed from New York to that port, and having also, thanks to a happy voyage, made land with a promptitude that left Chad Newsome, who had meant to meet them at the dock, belated. He had received their telegram, with the announcement of their immediate further advance, just as he was taking the train for Havre, so that nothing had remained for him but to await them in Paris. He hastily picked up Strether, at the hotel, for this purpose, and he even, with easy pleasantry, suggested the attendance of Waymarsh as well—Waymarsh, at the moment his cab rattled up, being engaged, under Strether's contemplative range, in a grave perambulation of the familiar court. Waymarsh had learned from his companion, who had already had a note, delivered by hand, from Chad, that the Pococks were due, and had ambiguously, though, as always, impressively, glowered at him over the circumstance; carrying himself in a manner in which Strether was now expert enough to recognise his uncertainty, in the premises, as to the best tone. The only tone he aimed at with confidence was a full tone—which was necessarily difficult in the absence of a full knowledge. The Pococks were a quantity as yet unmeasured, and, as he had practically brought them over, so this witness had to that extent exposed himself. He wanted to feel right about it, but could only, at the best, for the time, feel vague. 'I shall look to you, you know, immensely,' our friend had said, 'to help me with them,' and he had been quite conscious of the effect of the remark, and of others of the same sort, on his comrade's sombre sensibility. He had insisted on the fact that Waymarsh would quite like Mrs Pocock—one could be certain he would: he would be with her about

everything, and she would also be with *him,* and Miss Barrace's nose, in short, would find itself out of joint.

Strether had woven this web of cheerfulness while they waited in the court for Chad; he had sat smoking cigarettes to keep himself quiet while, caged and leonine, his fellow traveller paced and turned before him. Chad Newsome was doubtless to be struck, when he arrived, with the sharpness of their opposition at this particular hour; he was to remember, as a part of it, how Waymarsh came with him and with Strether to the street and stood there with a face half-wistful and half-rueful. They talked of him, the two others, as they drove, and Strether put Chad in possession of much of his own strained sense of things. He had already, a few days before, named to him the wire he was convinced their friend had pulled—a confidence that had made on the young man's part quite hugely for curiosity and diversion. The action of the matter, moreover, Strether could see, was to penetrate; he saw, that is, how Chad judged a system of influence in which Waymarsh had served as a determinant —an impression just now quickened again; with the whole bearing of such a fact on the youth's view of his relatives. As it came up between them that they might now take their friend for a feature of the control of these latter now sought to be exerted from Woollett, Strether felt indeed that it would be stamped all over him, half an hour later, for Sarah Pocock's eyes, that he was as much on Chad's 'side' as Waymarsh had probably described him. He was letting himself, at present, go; there was no denying it; it might be desperation, it might be confidence; he should offer himself to the arriving travellers bristling with all the lucidity he had cultivated.

He repeated to Chad what he had been saying in the court to Waymarsh; how there was no doubt whatever that his sister would find the latter a kindred spirit, no doubt of the alliance, based on an exchange of views, that the pair would successfully strike up. They would become as thick as thieves—which moreover was but a development of what Strether remembered to have said in one of his first dis-

cussions with his mate, struck as he had then already been with the elements of affinity between that personage and Mrs Newsome herself. 'I told him, one day, when he had questioned me on your mother, that she was a person who, when he should know her, would rouse in him, I was sure, a special enthusiasm; and that hangs together with the conviction we now feel—this certitude that Mrs Pocock will take him into her boat. For it's your mother's own boat that she's pulling.'

'Ah,' said Chad, 'Mother's worth fifty of Sally!'

"A thousand; but when you presently meet her, all the same, you'll be meeting your mother's representative—just as I shall. I feel like the outgoing ambassador,' said Strether, 'doing honour to his appointed successor.' A moment after speaking as he had just done he felt that he had inadvertently rather cheapened Mrs Newsome to her son; an impression audibly reflected, as at first seen, in Chad's prompt protest. He had recently rather failed of apprehension of the young man's attitude and temper—remaining principally conscious of how little worry, at the worst, he wasted; and he studied him at this critical hour with renewed interest. Chad had done exactly what he had promised him a fortnight previous—had accepted without another question his plea for delay. He was waiting cheerfully and handsomely, but also inscrutably and with a slight increase perhaps of the hardness originally involved in his acquired high polish. He was neither excited nor depressed; was easy and acute and deliberate—unhurried unflurried unworried, only at most a little less amused than usual. Strether felt him more than ever a justification of the extraordinary process of which his own absurd spirit had been the arena; he knew as their cab rolled along, knew as he hadn't even yet known, that nothing else than what Chad had done and had been would have led to his present showing. They had made him, these things, what he was, and the business hadn't been easy; it had taken time and trouble, it had cost, above all, a price. The result at any rate was now to be offered to Sally; which Strether, so far as that was con-

cerned, was glad to be there to witness. Would she in the least make it out or take it in, the result, or would she in the least care for it if she did? He scratched his chin as he asked himself by what name, when challenged—as he was sure he should be—he could call it for her. Oh those were determinations she must herself arrive at; since she wanted so much to see, let her see then and welcome. She had come out in the pride of her competence, yet it hummed in Strether's inner sense that she practically wouldn't see.

That this was moreover what Chad shrewdly suspected was clear from a word that next dropped from him. 'They're children; they play at life!'—and the exclamation was significant and reassuring. It implied that he hadn't then, for his companion's sensibility, appeared to give Mrs Newsome away; and it facilitated our friend's presently asking him if it were his idea that Mrs Pocock and Madame de Vionnet should become acquainted. Strether was still more sharply struck, hereupon, with Chad's lucidity. 'Why, isn't that exactly—to get a sight of the company I keep—what she has come out for?'

'Yes—I'm afraid it is,' Strether unguardedly replied.

Chad's quick rejoinder lighted his precipitation. 'Why do you say you're afraid?'

'Well, because I feel a certain responsibility. It's my testimony, I imagine, that will have been at the bottom of Mrs Pocock's curiosity. My letters, as I've supposed you to understand from the beginning, have spoken freely. I've certainly said my little say about Madame de Vionnet.'

All that, for Chad, was beautifully obvious. 'Yes, but you've only spoken handsomely.'

'Never more handsomely of any woman. But it's just that tone——!'

'That tone,' said Chad, 'that has fetched her? I dare say; but I've no quarrel with you about it. And no more has Madame de Vionnet. Don't you know by this time how she likes you?'

'Oh!'—and Strether had, with his groan, a real pang of melancholy. 'For all I've done for her!'

'Ah you've done a great deal.'

Chad's urbanity fairly shamed him, and he was at this moment absolutely impatient to see the face Sarah Pocock would present to a sort of thing, as he synthetically phrased it to himself, with no adequate forecast of which, despite his admonitions, she would certainly arrive. 'I've done *this!*'

'Well, this is all right. She likes,' Chad comfortably remarked, 'to be liked.'

It gave his companion a moment's thought. 'And she's sure Mrs Pocock *will*——?'

'No, I say that for you. She likes your liking her; it's so much, as it were,' Chad laughed, 'to the good. However, she doesn't despair of Sarah either, and is prepared, on her own side, to go all lengths.'

'In the way of appreciation?'

'Yes, and of everything else. In the way of general amiability, hospitality and welcome. She's under arms,' Chad laughed again; 'she's prepared.'

Strether took it in; then, as if an echo of Miss Barrace were in the air: 'She's wonderful.'

'You don't begin to know *how* wonderful!'

There was a depth in it, to Strether's ear, of confirmed luxury—almost a kind of unconscious insolence of proprietorship; but the effect of this glimpse was not at this moment to foster speculation: there was something so conclusive in so much graceful and generous assurance. It was in fact a fresh evocation; and the evocation had before many minutes another consequence. 'Well, I shall see her oftener now. I shall see her as much as I like—by your leave; which is what I hitherto haven't done.'

'It has been,' said Chad, but without reproach, 'only your own fault. I tried to bring you together, and *she*, my dear fellow—I never saw her more charming to any man. But you've got your extraordinary ideas.'

'Well, I *did* have,' Strether murmured; while he felt both

how they had possessed him and how they had now lost their authority. He couldn't have traced the sequence to the end, but it was all because of Mrs Pocock. Mrs Pocock might be because of Mrs Newsome, but that was still to be proved. What came over him was the sense of having stupidly failed to profit where profit would have been precious. It had been open to him to see so much more of her, and he had but let the good days pass. Fierce in him almost was the resolve to lose no more of them, and he whimsically reflected, while at Chad's side he drew nearer to his destination, that it was after all Sarah who would have quickened his chance. What her visit of inquisition might achieve in other directions was as yet all obscure—only not obscure that it would do supremely much to bring two earnest persons together. He had only to listen to Chad at this moment to feel it; for Chad was in the act of remarking to him that they of course both counted on him —he himself and the other earnest person—for cheer and support. It was brave to Strether to hear him talk as if the line of wisdom they had struck out was to make things ravishing to the Pococks. No, if Madame de Vionnet compassed *that*, compassed the ravishment of the Pococks, Madame de Vionnet would be prodigious. It would be a beautiful plan if it succeeded, and it all came to the question of Sarah's being really bribeable. The precedent of his own case helped Strether perhaps but little to consider she might prove so; it being distinct that her character would rather make for every possible difference. This idea of his own bribeability set him apart for himself; with the further mark in fact that his case was absolutely proved. He liked always, where Lambert Strether was concerned, to know the worst, and what he now seemed to know was not only that he was bribeable, but that he had been effectually bribed. The only difficulty was that he couldn't quite have said with what. It was as if he had sold himself, but hadn't somehow got the cash. That, however, was what, characteristically, *would* happen to him. It would naturally be his kind of traffic. While he thought of these things he

reminded Chad of the truth they mustn't lose sight of—the truth that, with all deference to her susceptibility to new interests, Sarah would have come out with a high firm definite purpose. 'She hasn't come out, you know, to be bamboozled. We may all be ravishing—nothing perhaps can be more easy for us; but she hasn't come out to be ravished. She has come out just simply to take you home.'

'Oh well, with *her* I'll go,' said Chad good-humouredly. 'I suppose you'll allow *that*.' And then as for a minute Strether said nothing: 'Or is your idea that when I've seen her I shan't want to go?' As this question, however, again left his friend silent he presently went on: 'My own idea at any rate is that they shall have while they're here the best sort of time.'

It was at this that Strether spoke. 'Ah there you are! I think if you really wanted to go——!'

'Well?' said Chad to bring it out.

'Well, you wouldn't trouble about our good time. You wouldn't care what sort of a time we have.'

Chad could always take in the easiest way in the world an ingenious suggestion. 'I see. But can I help it? I'm too decent.'

'Yes, you're too decent!' Strether heavily sighed. And he felt for the moment as if it were the preposterous end of his mission.

It ministered for the time to this temporary effect that Chad made no rejoinder. But he spoke again as they came in sight of the station. 'Do you mean to introduce her to Miss Gostrey?'

As to this Strether was ready. 'No.'

'But haven't you told me they know about her?'

'I think I've told you your mother knows.'

'And won't she have told Sally?'

'That's one of the things I want to see.'

'And if you find she *has*——?'

'Will I then, you mean, bring them together?'

'Yes,' said Chad with his pleasant promptness: 'to show her there's nothing in it.'

Strether hesitated. 'I don't know that I care very much what she may think there's in it.'

'Not if it represents what Mother thinks?'

'Ah what *does* your mother think?' There was in this some sound of bewilderment.

But they were just driving up, and help, of a sort, might after all be quite at hand. 'Isn't that, my dear man, what we're both just going to make out?'

II

STRETHER QUITTED the station half an hour later in different company. Chad had taken charge, for the journey to the hotel, of Sarah, Mamie, the maid and the luggage, all spaciously installed and conveyed; and it was only after the four had rolled away that his companion got into a cab with Jim. A strange new feeling had come over Strether, in consequence of which his spirits had risen; it was as if what had occurred on the alighting of his critics had been something other than his fear, though his fear had yet not been of an instant scene of violence. His impression had been *nothing* but what was *inevitable*—he said that to himself; yet relief and reassurance had softly dropped upon him. Nothing could be so odd as to be indebted for these things to the look of faces and the sound of voices that had been with him to satiety, as he might have said, for years; but he now knew, all the same, how uneasy he had felt; that was brought home to him by his present sense of a respite. It had come moreover in a flash of an eye; it had come in the smile with which Sarah, whom, at the window of her compartment, they had effusively greeted from the platform, rustled down to them a moment later, fresh and handsome from her cool June progress through the charming land. It was only a sign, but enough: she was going to be gracious and unallusive, she was going to play

the larger game—which was still more apparent, after she had emerged from Chad's arms, in her direct greeting to the valued friend of her family.

Strether *was* then as much as ever the valued friend of her family; it was something he could at all events go on with; and the manner of his response to it expressed even for himself how little he had enjoyed the prospect of ceasing to figure in that likeness. He had always seen Sarah gracious—had in fact rarely seen her shy or dry; her marked thin-lipped smile, intense without brightness and as prompt to act as the scrape of a safety-match; the protrusion of her rather remarkably long chin, which in her case represented invitation and urbanity, and not, as in most others, pugnacity and defiance; the penetration of her voice to a distance, the general encouragement and approval of her manner, were all elements with which intercourse had made him familiar, but which he noted to-day almost as if she had been a new acquaintance. This first glimpse of her had given a brief but vivid accent to her resemblance to her mother; he could have taken her for Mrs Newsome while she met his eyes as the train rolled into the station. It was an impression that quickly dropped; Mrs Newsome was much handsomer, and while Sarah inclined to the massive her mother had, at an age, still the girdle of a maid; also the latter's chin was rather short, than long, and her smile, by good fortune, much more, oh ever so much more, mercifully vague. Strether had seen Mrs Newsome reserved; he had literally heard her silent, though he had never known her unpleasant. It was the case with Mrs Pocock that he had known *her* unpleasant, even though he had never known her not affable. She had forms of affability that were in a high degree assertive; nothing for instance had ever been more striking than that she was affable to Jim.

What had told in any case at the window of the train was her high clear forehead, that forehead which her friends, for some reason, always thought of as a 'brow'; the long reach of her eyes—it came out at this juncture in such a manner as to remind him, oddly enough, also of

that of Waymarsh's; and the unusual gloss of her dark hair, dressed and hatted, after her mother's refined example, with such an avoidance of extremes that it was always spoken of at Woollett as 'their own'. Though this analogy dropped as soon as she was on the platform it had lasted long enough to make him feel all the advantage, as it were, of his relief. The woman at home, the woman to whom he was attached, was before him just long enough to give him again the measure of the wretchedness, in fact really of the shame, of their having to recognise the formation, between them, of a 'split'. He had taken this measure in solitude and meditation; but the catastrophe, as Sarah steamed up, looked for its few seconds unprecedentedly dreadful—or proved, more exactly, altogether unthinkable; so that his finding something free and familiar to respond to brought with it in an instant renewal of his loyalty. He had suddenly sounded the whole depth, had grasped at what he might have lost.

Well, he could now, for the quarter of an hour of their detention, hover about the travellers as soothingly as if their direct message to him was that he had lost nothing. He wasn't going to have Sarah write to her mother that night that he was in any way altered or strange. There had been times enough for a month when it had seemed to him that he was strange, that he was altered, in every way; but that was a matter for himself; he knew at least whose business it was *not*; it was not at all events such a circumstance as Sarah's own unaided lights would help her to. Even if she had come out to flash those lights more than yet appeared she wouldn't make much headway against mere pleasantness. He counted on being able to be merely pleasant to the end, and if only from incapacity moreover to formulate anything different. He couldn't even formulate to himself his being changed and queer; it had taken place, the process, somewhere deep down; Maria Gostrey had caught glimpses of it; but how was he to fish it up, even if he desired, for Mrs Pocock? This was then the spirit in which he hovered, and with the easier throb in it much

indebted furthermore to the impression of high and established adequacy as a pretty girl promptly produced in him by Mamie. He had wondered vaguely—turning over many things in the fidget of his thoughts—if Mamie *were* as pretty as Woollett published her; as to which issue seeing her now again was to be so swept away by Woollett's opinion that this consequence really let loose for the imagination an avalanche of others. There were positively five minutes in which the last word seemed of necessity to abide with a Woollett represented by a Mamie. This was the sort of truth the place itself would feel; it would send her forth in confidence; it would point to her with triumph; it would take its stand on her with assurance; it would be conscious of no requirement she didn't meet, of no question she couldn't answer.

Well, it was right, Strether slipped smoothly enough into the cheerfulness of saying: granted that a community *might* be best represented by a young lady of twenty-two, Mamie perfectly played the part, played it as if she were used to it, and looked and spoke and dressed the character. He wondered if she mightn't, in the high light of Paris, a cool full studio-light, becoming yet treacherous, show as too conscious of these matters; but the next moment he felt satisfied that her consciousness was after all empty for its size, rather too simple than too mixed, and that the kind way with her would be not to take many things out of it, but to put as many as possible in. She was robust and conveniently tall; just a trifle too bloodlessly fair perhaps, but with a pleasant public familiar radiance that affirmed her vitality. She might have been 'receiving' for Woollett, wherever she found herself, and there was something in her manner, her tone, her motion, her pretty blue eyes, her pretty perfect teeth and her very small, too small, nose, that immediately placed her, to the fancy, between the windows of a hot bright room in which voices were high —up at that end to which people were brought to be 'presented'. They were there to congratulate, these images, and Strether's renewed vision, on this hint, completed the

idea. What Mamie was like was the happy bride, the bride after the church and just before going away. She wasn't the mere maiden, and yet was only as much married as that quantity came to. She was in the brilliant acclaimed festal stage. Well, might it last her long!

Strether rejoiced in these things for Chad, who was all genial attention to the needs of his friends, besides having arranged that his servant should re-enforce him; the ladies were certainly pleasant to see, and Mamie would be at any time and anywhere pleasant to exhibit. She would look extraordinarily like his young wife—the wife of a honeymoon, should he go about with her; but that was his own affair—or perhaps it was hers; it was at any rate something she couldn't help. Strether remembered how he had seen him come up with Jeanne de Vionnet in Gloriani's garden, and the fancy he had had about that—the fancy obscured now, thickly overlaid with others; the recollection was during these minutes his only note of trouble. He had often, in spite of himself, wondered if Chad but too probably were not with Jeanne the object of a still and shaded flame. It was on the cards that the child *might* be tremulously in love, and this conviction now flickered up not a bit the less for his disliking to think of it, for its being, in a complicated situation, a complication the more, and for something indescribable in Mamie, something at all events straightway lent her by his own mind, something that gave her value, gave her intensity and purpose, as the symbol of an opposition. Little Jeanne wasn't really at all in question —how *could* she be?—yet from the moment Miss Pocock had shaken her skirts on the platform, touched up the immense bows of her hat and settled properly over her shoulder the strap of her morocco-and-gilt travelling-satchel, from that moment little Jeanne was opposed.

It was in the cab with Jim that impressions really crowded on Strether, giving him the strangest sense of length of absence from people among whom he had lived for years. Having them thus come out to him was as if he had returned to find them; and the droll promptitude of

Jim's mental reaction threw his own initiation far back into the past. Whoever might or mightn't be suited by what was going on among them, Jim, for one, would certainly be: his instant recognition—frank and whimsical—of what the affair was for *him* gave Strether a glow of pleasure. 'I say, you know, this *is* about my shape, and if it hadn't been for *you*——!' so he broke out as the charming streets met his healthy appetite; and he wound up, after an expressive nudge, with a clap of his companion's knee and an 'Oh you, you—you *are* doing it!' that was charged with rich meaning. Strether felt in it the intention of homage, but, with a curiosity otherwise occupied, postponed taking it up. What he was asking himself for the time was how Sarah Pocock, in the opportunity already given her, had judged her brother—from whom he himself, as they finally, at the station, separated for their different conveyances, had had a look into which he could read more than one message. However Sarah was judging her brother, Chad's conclusion about his sister, and about her husband and her husband's sister, was at the least on the way not to fail of confidence. Strether felt the confidence, and that, as the look between them was an exchange, what he himself gave back was relatively vague. This comparison of notes however could wait; everything struck him as depending on the effect produced by Chad. Neither Sarah nor Mamie had in any way, at the station—where they had had after all ample time—broken out about it; which, to make up for this, was what our friend had expected of Jim as soon as they should find themselves together.

It was queer to him that he had that noiseless brush with Chad; an ironic intelligence with this youth on the subject of his relatives, an intelligence carried on under their nose and, as might be said, at their expense—such a matter marked again for him strongly the numbers of stages he had come; albeit that if the number seemed great the time taken for the final one was but the turn of a hand. He had before this had many moments of wondering if he himself weren't perhaps changed even as Chad was changed. Only what

in Chad was conspicuous improvement—well, he had no name ready for the working, in his own organism, of his own more timid dose. He should have to see first what this action would amount to. And for his occult passage with the young man, after all, the directness of it had no greater oddity than the fact that the young man's way with the three travellers should have been so happy a manifestation. Strether liked him for it, on the spot, as he hadn't yet liked him; it affected him while it lasted as he might have been affected by some light pleasant perfect work of art: to that degree that he wondered if they were really worthy of it, took it in and did it justice; to that degree that it would have been scarce a miracle if, there in the luggage-room, while they waited for their things, Sarah had pulled his sleeve and drawn him aside. 'You're right; we haven't quite known what you mean, Mother and I, but now we see. Chad's magnificent; what can one want more? If *this* is the kind of thing——!' On which they might, as it were, have embraced and begun to work together.

Ah how much, as it was, for all her bridling brightness —which was merely general and noticed nothing—*would* they work together? Strether knew he was unreasonable; he set it down to his being nervous: people couldn't notice everything and speak of everything in a quarter of an hour. Possibly, no doubt, also, he made too much of Chad's display. Yet, none the less, when, at the end of five minutes, in the cab, Jim Pocock had said nothing either—hadn't said, that is, what Strether wanted, though he had said much else—it all suddenly bounced back to their being either stupid or wilful. It was more probably on the whole the former; so that that would be the drawback of the bridling brightness. Yes, they would bridle and be bright; they would make the best of what was before them, but their observation would fail; it would be beyond them; they simply wouldn't understand. Of what use would it be then that they had come?—if they weren't to be intelligent up to *that* point: unless indeed he himself were utterly deluded and extravagant? Was he, on this question of Chad's im-

provement, fantastic and away from the truth? Did he live in a false world, a world that had grown simply to suit him, and was his present slight irritation—in the face now of Jim's silence in particular—but the alarm of the vain thing menaced by the touch of the real? Was this contribution of the real possibly the mission of the Pococks?—had they come to make the work of observation, as *he* had practised observation, crack and crumble, and to reduce Chad to the plain terms in which honest minds could deal with him? Had they come in short to be sane where Strether was destined to feel that he himself had only been silly?

He glanced at such a contingency, but it failed to hold him long when once he had reflected that he would have been silly, in this case, with Maria Gostrey and little Bilham, with Madame de Vionnet and little Jeanne, with Lambert Strether, in fine, and above all with Chad Newsome himself. Wouldn't it be found to have made more for reality to be silly with these persons than sane with Sarah and Jim? Jim in fact, he presently made up his mind, was individually out of it; Jim didn't care; Jim hadn't come out either for Chad or for him; Jim in short left the moral side to Sally and indeed simply availed himself now, for the sense of recreation, of the fact that he left almost everything to Sally. He was nothing compared to Sally, and not so much by reason of Sally's temper and will as by that of her more developed type and greater acquaintance with the world. He quite frankly and serenely confessed, as he sat there with Strether, that he felt his type hang far in the rear of his wife's and still further, if possible, in the rear of his sister's. Their types, he well knew, were recognised and acclaimed; whereas the most a leading Woollett businessman could hope to achieve socially, and for that matter industrially, was a certain freedom to play into this general glamour.

The impression he made on our friend was another of the things that marked our friend's road. It was a strange impression, especially as so soon produced; Strether had received it, he judged, all in the twenty minutes; it struck

him at least as but in a minor degree the work of the long Woollett years. Pocock was normally and consentingly though not quite wittingly out of the question. It was despite his being normal; it was despite his being cheerful; it was despite his being a leading Woollett business-man; and the determination of his fate left him thus perfectly usual—as everything else about it was clearly, to his sense, not less so. He seemed to say that there was a whole side of life on which the perfectly usual *was* for leading Woollett business-men to be out of the question. He made no more of it than that, and Strether, so far as Jim was concerned, desired to make no more. Only Strether's imagination, as always, worked, and he asked himself if this side of life were not somehow connected, for those who figured on it, with the fact of marriage. Would *his* relation to it, had he married ten years before, have become now the same as Pocock's? Might it even become the same should he marry in a few months? Should he ever know himself as much out of the question for Mrs Newsome as Jim knew himself —in a dim way—for Mrs Jim?

To turn his eyes in that direction was to be personally reassured; he was different from Pocock; he had affirmed himself differently and he was held after all in a higher esteem. What none the less came home to him, however, at this hour, was that the society over there, of which Sarah and Mamie—and in a more eminent way, Mrs Newsome herself—were specimens, was essentially a society of women, and that poor Jim wasn't in it. He himself, Lambert Strether, *was* as yet in some degree—which was an odd situation for a man; but it kept coming back to him in a whimsical way that he should perhaps find his marriage had cost him his place. This occasion indeed, whatever that fancy represented, was not a time of sensible exclusion for Jim, who was in a state of manifest response to the charm of his adventure. Small and fat and constantly facetious, straw-coloured and destitute of marks, he would have been practically indistinguishable hadn't his constant preference for light-grey clothes, for white hats, for very big cigars and

very little stories, done what it could for his identity. There were signs in him, though none of them plaintive, of always paying for others; and the principal one perhaps was just this failure of type. It was with this that he paid, rather than with fatigue or waste; and also doubtless a little with the effort of humour—never irrelevant to the conditions, to the relations, with which he was acquainted.

He gurgled his joy as they rolled through the happy streets; he declared that his trip was a regular windfall, and that he wasn't there, he was eager to remark, to hang back from anything; he didn't know quite what Sally had come for, but *he* had come for a good time. Strether indulged him even while wondering if what Sally wanted her brother to go back for was to become like her husband. He trusted that a good time was to be, out and out, the programme for all of them; and he assented liberally to Jim's proposal that, disencumbered and irresponsible—his things were in the omnibus with those of the others—they should take a further turn round before going to the hotel. It wasn't for *him* to tackle Chad—it was Sally's job; and as it would be like her, he felt, to open fire on the spot, it wouldn't be amiss of them to hold off and give her time. Strether, on his side, only asked to give her time; so he jogged with his companion along boulevards and avenues, trying to extract from meagre material some forecast of his catastrophe. He was quick enough to see that Jim Pocock declined judgment, had hovered quite round the outer edge of discussion and anxiety, leaving all analysis of their question to the ladies alone and now only feeling his way toward some small droll cynicism. It broke out afresh, the cynicism—it had already shown a flicker—in a but slightly deferred 'Well, hanged if I would if *I* were he!'

'You mean you wouldn't in Chad's place——?'

'Give up this to go back and boss the advertising!' Poor Jim, with his arms folded and his little legs out in the open fiacre, drank in the sparkling Paris noon and carried his eyes from one side of their vista to the other. 'Why I want to come right out here and live myself. And I want to live

while I *am* here too. I feel with *you*—oh you've been grand, old man, and I've twigged—that it ain't right to worry Chad. *I* don't mean to persecute him; I couldn't in conscience. It's thanks to you at any rate that I'm here, and I'm sure I'm much obliged. You're a lovely pair.'

There were things in this speech that Strether let pass for the time. 'Don't you then think it important the advertising should be thoroughly taken in hand? Chad *will* be, so far as capacity is concerned,' he went on, 'the man to do it.'

'Where did he get his capacity,' Jim asked, 'over here?'

'He didn't get it over here, and the wonderful thing is that over here he hasn't inevitably lost it. He has a natural turn for business, an extraordinary head. He comes by that,' Strether explained, 'honestly enough. He's in that respect his father's son, and also—for she's wonderful in her way too—his mother's. He has other tastes and other tendencies; but Mrs Newsome and your wife are quite right about his having that. He's very remarkable.'

'Well, I guess he is,' Jim Pocock comfortably sighed. 'But if you've believed so in his making us hum, why have you so prolonged the discussion? Don't you know we've been quite anxious about you?'

These questions were not informed with earnestness, but Strether saw he must none the less make a choice and take a line. 'Because, you see, I've greatly liked it. I've liked my Paris. I dare say I've liked it too much.'

'Oh you old wretch!' Jim gaily exclaimed.

'But nothing's concluded,' Strether went on. 'The case is more complex than it looks from Woollett.'

'Oh well, it looks bad enough from Woollett!' Jim declared.

'Even after all I've written?'

Jim bethought himself. 'Isn't it what you've written that has made Mrs Newsome pack us off? That at least and Chad's not turning up?'

Strether made a reflexion of his own. 'I see. That she

should do something was, no doubt, inevitable, and your wife has therefore of course come out to act.'

'Oh yes,' Jim concurred—'to act. But Sally comes out to act, you know,' he lucidly added, 'every time she leaves the house. She never comes out but she *does* act. She's acting moreover now for her mother, and that fixes the scale.' Then he wound up, opening all his senses to it, with a renewed embrace of pleasant Paris. 'We haven't all the same at Woollett got anything like this.'

Strether continued to consider. 'I'm bound to say for you all that you strike me as having arrived in a very mild and reasonable frame of mind. You don't show your claws. I felt just now in Mrs Pocock no symptom of that. She isn't fierce,' he went on. 'I'm such a nervous idiot that I thought she might be.'

'Oh don't you know her well enough,' Pocock asked, 'to have noticed that she never gives herself away, any more than her mother ever does? They ain't fierce, either of 'em; they let you come quite close. They wear their fur smooth side out—the warm side in. Do you know what they are?' Jim pursued as he looked about him, giving the question, as Strether felt, but half his care—'do you know what they are? They're about as intense as they can live.'

'Yes'—and Strether's concurrence had a positive precipitation; 'they're about as intense as they can live.'

'They don't lash about and shake the cage,' said Jim, who seemed pleased with his analogy; 'and it's at feeding-time that they're quietest. But they always get there.'

'They do indeed—they always get there!' Strether replied with a laugh that justified his confession of nervousness. He disliked to be talking sincerely of Mrs Newsome with Pocock; he could have talked insincerely. But there was something he wanted to know, a need created in him by her recent intermission, by his having given from the first so much, as now more than ever appeared to him, and got so little. It was as if a queer truth in his companion's metaphor had rolled over him with a rush. She *had* been quiet at feeding-time; she had fed, and Sarah had fed with

her, out of the big bowl of all his recent free communication, his vividness and pleasantness, his ingenuity and even his eloquence, while the current of her response had steadily run thin. Jim meanwhile however, it was true, slipped characteristically into shallowness from the moment he ceased to speak out of the experience of a husband.

'But of course Chad has now the advantage of being there before her. If he doesn't work that for all it's worth——!' He sighed with contingent pity at his brother-in-law's possible want of resource. 'He has worked it on *you*, pretty well, eh?' and he asked the next moment if there were anything new at the Varieties, which he pronounced in the American manner. They talked about the Varieties—Strether confessing to a knowledge which produced again on Pocock's part a play of innuendo as vague as a nursery rhyme, yet as aggressive as an elbow in his side; and they finished their drive under the protection of easy themes. Strether waited to the end, but still in vain, for any show that Jim had seen Chad as different; and he could scarce have explained the discouragement he drew from the absence of this testimony. It was what he had taken his own stand on, so far as he had taken a stand; and if they were all going to see nothing he had only wasted his time. He gave his friend till the very last moment, till they had come into sight of the hotel; and when poor Pocock only continued cheerful and envious and funny he fairly grew to dislike him, to feel him extravagantly common. If they were *all* going to see nothing! Strether knew, as this came back to him, that he was also letting Pocock represent for him what Mrs Newsome wouldn't see. He went on disliking, in the light of Jim's commonness, to talk to him about that lady; yet just before the cab pulled up he knew the extent of his desire for the real word from Woollett.

'Has Mrs Newsome at all given way——?'

'"Given way"?'—Jim echoed it with the practical derision of his sense of a long past.

'Under the strain, I mean, of hope deferred, of disappointment repeated and thereby intensified.'

'Oh is she prostrate, you mean?'—he had his categories in hand. 'Why yes, she's prostrate—just as Sally is. But they're never so lively, you know, as when they're prostrate.'

'Ah Sarah's prostrate?' Strether vaguely murmured.

'It's when they're prostrate that they most sit up.'

'And Mrs Newsome's sitting up?'

'All night, my boy—for *you!*' And Jim fetched him, with a vulgar little guffaw, a thrust that gave relief to the picture. But he had got what he wanted. He felt on the spot that this *was* the real word from Woollett. 'So don't you go home!' Jim added while he alighted and while his friend, letting him profusely pay the cabman, sat on in a momentary muse. Strether wondered if that were the real word too.

III

AS THE door of Mrs Pocock's salon was pushed open for him, the next day, well before noon, he was reached by a voice with a charming sound that made him just falter before crossing the threshold. Madame de Vionnet was already on the field, and this gave the drama a quicker pace than he felt it as yet—though his suspense had increased—in the power of any act of his own to do. He had spent the previous evening with all his old friends together; yet he would still have described himself as quite in the dark in respect to a forecast of their influence on his situation. It was strange now, none the less, that in the light of this unexpected note of her presence he felt Madame de Vionnet a part of that situation as she hadn't even yet been. She was alone, he found himself assuming, with Sarah, and there was a bearing in that—somehow beyond his control—on his personal fate. Yet she was only saying something quite easy and independent—the thing she had come, as a good friend of Chad's, on purpose to say. 'There isn't anything at all——? I should be so delighted.'

It was clear enough, when they were there before him, how she had been received. He saw this, as Sarah got up to greet him, from something fairly hectic in Sarah's face. He saw furthermore that they weren't, as had first come to him, alone together; he was at no loss as to the identity of the broad high back presented to him in the embrasure of the window furthest from the door. Waymarsh, whom he had to-day not yet seen, whom he only knew to have left the hotel before him, and who had taken part, the night previous, on Mrs Pocock's kind invitation, conveyed by Chad, in the entertainment, informal but cordial, promptly offered by that lady—Waymarsh had anticipated him even as Madame de Vionnet had done, and, with his hands in his pockets and his attitude unaffected by Strether's entrance, was looking out, in marked detachment, at the Rue de Rivoli. The latter felt it in the air—it was immense how Waymarsh could mark things—that he had remained deeply dissociated from the overture to their hostess that we have recorded on Madame de Vionnet's side. He had, conspicuously, tact, besides a stiff general view; and this was why he had left Mrs Pocock to struggle alone. He would outstay the visitor; he would unmistakably wait; to what had he been doomed for months past but waiting? Therefore she was to feel that she had him in reserve. What support she drew from this was still to be seen, for, although Sarah was vividly bright, she had given herself up for the moment to an ambiguous flushed formalism. She had had to reckon more quickly than she expected; but it concerned her first of all to signify that she was not to be taken unawares. Strether arrived precisely in time for her showing it. 'Oh you're too good; but I don't think I feel quite helpless. I have my brother—and these American friends. And then you know I have been to Paris. I *know* Paris,' said Sally Pocock in a tone that breathed a certain chill on Strether's heart.

'Ah but a woman, in this tiresome place where everything's always changing, a woman of good will,' Madame de Vionnet threw off, 'can always help a woman. I'm sure you

"know"—but we know perhaps different things.' She too, visibly, wished to make no mistake; but it was a fear of a different order and more kept out of sight. She smiled in welcome at Strether; she greeted him more familiarly than Mrs Pocock; she put out her hand to him without moving from her place; and it came to him in the course of a minute and in the oddest way—yes, positively—she was giving him over to ruin. She was all kindness and ease, but she couldn't help so giving him; she was exquisite, and her being just as she was poured for Sarah a sudden rush of meaning into his own equivocations. How could she know how she was hurting him? She wanted to show as simple and humble—in the degree compatible with operative charm; but it was just this that seemed to put him on her side. She struck him as dressed, as arranged, as prepared infinitely to conciliate—with the very poetry of good taste in her view of the conditions of her early call. She was ready to advise about dressmakers and shops; she held herself wholly at the disposition of Chad's family. Strether noticed her card on the table—her coronet and her 'Comtesse'—and the imagination was sharp in him of certain private adjustments in Sarah's mind. She had never, he was sure, sat with a 'Comtesse' before, and such was the specimen of that class he had been keeping to play on her. She had crossed the sea very particularly for a look at her; but he read in Madame de Vionnet's own eyes that this curiosity hadn't been so successfully met as that she herself wouldn't now have more than ever need of him. She looked much as she had looked to him that morning at Notre Dame; he noted in fact the suggestive sameness of her discreet and delicate dress. It seemed to speak—perhaps a little prematurely or too finely—of the sense in which she would help Mrs Pocock with the shops. The way that lady took her in, moreover, added depth to his impression of what Miss Gostrey, by their common wisdom, had escaped. He winced as he saw himself but for that timely prudence ushering in Maria as a guide and an example. There was however a touch of relief for him in his glimpse, so far as he had got it, of

Sarah's line. She 'knew Paris'. Madame de Vionnet had, for that matter, lightly taken this up. 'Ah then you've a turn for that, an affinity that belongs to your family. Your brother, though his long experience makes a difference, I admit, has become one of us in a marvellous way.' And she appealed to Strether in the manner of a woman who could always glide off with smoothness into another subject. Wasn't *he* struck with the way Mr Newsome had made the place his own, and hadn't he been in a position to profit by his friend's wondrous expertness?

Strether felt the bravery, at the least, of her presenting herself so promptly to sound that note, and yet asked himself what other note, after all, she *could* strike from the moment she presented herself at all. She could meet Mrs Pocock only on the ground of the obvious, and what feature of Chad's situation was more eminent than the fact that he had created for himself a new set of circumstances? Unless she hid herself altogether she could show but as one of these, an illustration of his domiciled and indeed of his confirmed condition. And the consciousness of all this in her charming eyes was so clear and fine that as she thus publicly drew him into her boat she produced in him such a silent agitation as he was not to fail afterwards to denounce as pusillanimous. 'Ah don't be so charming to me!—for it makes us intimate, and after all what *is* between us when I've been so tremendously on my guard and have seen you but half a dozen times?' He recognised once more the perverse law that so inveterately governed his poor personal aspects: it would be exactly *like* the way things always turned out for him that he should affect Mrs Pocock and Waymarsh as launched in a relation in which he had never been launched at all. They were at this very moment—they could only be—attributing to him the full licence of it, and all by the operation of her own tone with him; whereas his sole licence had been to cling with intensity to the brink, not to dip so much as a toe into the flood. But the flicker of his fear on this occasion was not, as may be added, to repeat itself; it sprang up, for its moment, only to die down

and then go out for ever. To meet his fellow visitor's invocation and, with Sarah's brilliant eyes on him, answer, *was* quite sufficiently to step into her boat. During the rest of the time her visit lasted he felt himself proceed to each of the proper offices, successively, for helping to keep the adventurous skiff afloat. It rocked beneath him, but he settled himself in his place. He took up an oar and, since he was to have the credit of pulling, pulled.

'That will make it all the pleasanter if it so happens that we *do* meet,' Madame de Vionnet had further observed in reference to Mrs Pocock's mention of her initiated state; and she had immediately added that, after all, her hostess couldn't be in need with the good offices of Mr Strether so close at hand. 'It's he, I gather, who has learned to know his Paris, and to love it, better than any one ever before in so short a time; so that between him and your brother, when it comes to the point, how can you possibly want for good guidance? The great thing, Mr Strether will show you,' she smiled, 'is just to let one's self go.'

'Oh I've not let myself go very far,' Strether answered, feeling quite as if he had been called upon to hint to Mrs Pocock how Parisians could talk. 'I'm only afraid of showing I haven't let myself go far enough. I've taken a good deal of time, but I must quite have had the air of not budging from one spot.' He looked at Sarah in a manner that he thought she might take as engaging, and he made, under Madame de Vionnet's protection, as it were, his first personal point. 'What has really happened has been that, all the while, I've done what I came out for.'

Yet it only at first gave Madame de Vionnet a chance immediately to take him up. 'You've renewed acquaintance with your friend—you've learned to know him again.' She spoke with such cheerful helpfulness that they might, in a common cause, have been calling together and pledged to mutual aid.

Waymarsh, at this, as if he had been in question, straightway turned from the window. 'Oh yes, Countess—he has renewed acquaintance with *me*, and he *has*, I guess, learnt

something about me, though I don't know how much he has liked it. It's for Strether himself to say whether he has felt it justifies his course.'

'Oh but *you*,' said the Countess gaily, 'are not in the least what he came out for—is he really, Strether?—and I hadn't you at all in my mind. I was thinking of Mr Newsome, of whom we think so much and with whom, precisely, Mrs Pocock has given herself the opportunity to take up threads. What a pleasure for you both!' Madame de Vionnet, with her eyes on Sarah, bravely continued.

Mrs Pocock met her handsomely, but Strether quickly saw she meant to accept no version of her movements or plans from any other lips. She required no patronage and no support, which were but other names for a false position; she would show in her own way what she chose to show, and this she expressed with a dry glitter that recalled to him a fine Woollett wintry morning. 'I've never wanted for opportunities to see my brother. We've many things to think of at home, and great responsibilities and occupations, and our home's not an impossible place. We've plenty of reasons,' Sarah continued a little piercingly, 'for everything we do'—and in short she wouldn't give herself the least little scrap away. But she added as one who was always bland and who could afford a concession: 'I've come because—well, because we do come.'

'Ah then fortunately!'—Madame de Vionnet breathed it to the air. Five minutes later they were on their feet for her to take leave, standing together in an affability that had succeeded in surviving a further exchange of remarks; only with the emphasised appearance on Waymarsh's part of a tendency to revert, in a ruminating manner and as with an instinctive or a precautionary lightening of his tread, to an open window and his point of vantage. The glazed and gilded room, all red damask, ormolu, mirrors, clocks, looked south, and the shutters were bowed upon the summer morning; but the Tuileries garden and what was beyond it, over which the whole place hung, were things visible through gaps; so that the far-spreading presence of Paris came up

in coolness, dimness and invitation, in the twinkle of gilt-tipped palings, the crunch of gravel, the click of hoofs, the crack of whips, things that suggested some parade of the circus. 'I think it probable,' said Mrs Pocock, 'that I shall have the opportunity of going to my brother's. I've no doubt it's very pleasant indeed.' She spoke as to Strether, but her face was turned with an intensity of brightness to Madame de Vionnet, and there was a moment during which, while she thus fronted her, our friend expected to hear her add: 'I'm much obliged to you, I'm sure, for inviting me there.' He guessed that for five seconds these words were on the point of coming; he heard them as clearly as if they had been spoken; but he presently knew they had just failed—knew it by a glance, quick and fine, from Madame de Vionnet, which told him that she too had felt them in the air, but that the point had luckily not been made in any manner requiring notice. This left her free to reply only to what had been said.

'That the Boulevard Malesherbes may be common ground for us offers me the best prospect I see for the pleasure of meeting you again.'

'Oh I shall come to see you, since you've been so good': and Mrs Pocock looked her invader well in the eyes. The flush in Sarah's cheeks had by this time settled to a small definite crimson spot that was not without its own bravery; she held her head a good deal up, and it came to Strether that of the two, at this moment, she was the one who most carried out the idea of a Countess. He quite took in, however, that she would really return her visitor's civility: she wouldn't report again at Woollett without at least so much producible history as that in her pocket.

'I want extremely to be able to show you my little daughter,' Madame de Vionnet went on; 'and I should have brought her with me if I hadn't wished first to ask your leave. I was in hopes I should perhaps find Miss Pocock, of whose being with you I've heard from Mr Newsome and whose acquaintance I should so much like my child to make. If I have the pleasure of seeing her and you do permit it I

shall venture to ask her to be kind to Jeanne. Mr Strether will tell you'—she beautifully kept it up—'that my poor girl is gentle and good and rather lonely. They've made friends, he and she, ever so happily, and he doesn't, I believe, think ill of her. As for Jeanne herself he has had the same success with her that I know he has had here wherever he has turned.' She seemed to ask him for permission to say these things, or seemed rather to take it, softly and happily, with the ease of intimacy, for granted, and he had quite the consciousness now that not to meet her at any point more than halfway would be odiously, basely to abandon her. Yes, he was *with* her, and, opposed even in this covert, this semi-safe fashion, to those who were not, he felt, strangely and confusedly, but excitedly, inspiringly, how much and how far. It was as if he had positively waited in suspense for something from her that would let him in deeper, so that he might show her how he could take it. And what did in fact come as she drew out a little her farewell served sufficiently the purpose. 'As his success is a matter that I'm sure he'll never mention for himself, I feel, you see, the less scruple; which it's very good of me to say, you know, by the way,' she added as she addressed herself to him; 'considering how little direct advantage I've gained from your triumphs with *me*. When does one ever see you? I wait at home and I languish. You'll have rendered me the service, Mrs Pocock, at least,' she wound up, 'of giving me one of my much-too-rare glimpses of this gentleman.'

'I certainly should be sorry to deprive you of anything that seems so much, as you describe it, your natural due. Mr Strether and I are very old friends,' Sarah allowed, 'but the privilege of his society isn't a thing I shall quarrel about with any one.'

'And yet, dear Sarah,' he freely broke in, 'I feel, when I hear you say that, that you don't quite do justice to the important truth of the extent to which—as you're also mine—I'm *your* natural due. I should like much better,' he laughed, 'to see you fight for me.'

She met him, Mrs Pocock, on this, with an arrest of speech—with a certain breathlessness, as he immediately fancied, on the score of a freedom for which she wasn't quite prepared. It had flared up—for all the harm he had intended by it—because, confoundedly, he didn't want any more to be afraid about her than he wanted to be afraid about Madame de Vionnet. He had never, naturally, called her anything but Sarah at home, and though he had perhaps never quite so markedly invoked her as his 'dear', that was somehow partly because no occasion had hitherto laid so effective a trap for it. But something admonished him now that it was too late—unless indeed it were possibly too early; and that he at any rate shouldn't have pleased Mrs Pocock the more by it. 'Well, Mr Strether——!' she murmured with vagueness, yet with sharpness, while her crimson spots burned a trifle brighter and he was aware that this must be for the present the limit of her response. Madame de Vionnet had already, however, come to his aid, and Waymarsh, as if for further participation, moved again back to them. It was true that the aid rendered by Madame de Vionnet was questionable; it was a sign that, for all one might confess to with her, and for all she might complain of not enjoying, she could still insidiously show how much of the material of conversation had accumulated between them.

'The real truth is, you know, that you sacrifice one without mercy to dear old Maria. She leaves no room in your life for anybody else. Do you know,' she inquired of Mrs Pocock, 'about dear old Maria? The worst is that Miss Gostrey is really a wonderful woman.'

'Oh yes indeed,' Strether answered for her, 'Mrs Pocock knows about Miss Gostrey. Your mother, Sarah, must have told you about her; your mother knows everything,' he sturdily pursued. 'And I cordially admit,' he added with his conscious gaiety of courage, 'that she's as wonderful a woman as you like.'

'Ah it isn't *I* who "like", dear Mr Strether, anything to do with the matter!' Sarah Pocock promptly protested; 'and

I'm by no means sure I have—from my mother or from any one else—a notion of whom you're talking about.'

'Well, he won't let you see her, you know,' Madame de Vionnet sympathetically threw in. 'He never lets *me*—old friends as we are: I mean as I am with Maria. He reserves her for his best hours; keeps her consummately to himself; only gives us others the crumbs of the feast.'

'Well, Countess, *I've* had some of the crumbs,' Waymarsh observed with weight and covering her with his large look; which led her to break in before he could go on.

'*Comment donc*, he shares her with *you*?' she exclaimed in droll stupefaction. 'Take care you don't have, before you go much further, rather more of all *ces dames* than you may know what to do with!'

But he only continued in his massive way. 'I can post you about the lady, Mrs Pocock, so far as you may care to hear. I've seen her quite a number of times, and I was practically present when they made acquaintance. I've kept my eye on her right along, but I don't know as there's any real harm in her.'

'"Harm"?' Madame de Vionnet quickly echoed. 'Why she's the dearest and cleverest of all the clever and dear.'

'Well, you run her pretty close, Countess,' Waymarsh returned with spirit; 'though there's no doubt she's pretty well up in things. She knows her way round Europe. Above all there's no doubt she does love Strether.'

'Ah but we all do that—we all love Strether: it isn't a merit!' their fellow visitor laughed, keeping to her idea with a good conscience at which our friend was aware that he marvelled, though he trusted also for it, as he met her exquisitely expressive eyes, to some later light.

The prime effect of her tone, however—and it was a truth which his own eyes gave back to her in sad ironic play—could only be to make him feel that, to say such things to a man in public, a woman must practically think of him as ninety years old. He had turned awkwardly, responsibly red, he knew, at her mention of Maria Gostrey; Sarah Pocock's presence—the particular quality of it—had made this

inevitable; and then he had grown still redder in proportion as he hated to have shown anything at all. He felt indeed that he was showing much, as, uncomfortably and almost in pain, he offered up his redness to Waymarsh, who, strangely enough, seemed now to be looking at him with a certain explanatory yearning. Something deep—something built on their old old relation—passed, in this complexity, between them; he got the side-wind of a loyalty that stood behind all actual queer questions. Waymarsh's dry bare humour—as it gave itself to be taken—gloomed out to demand justice. 'Well, if you talk of Miss Barrace I've *my* chance too,' it appeared stiffly to nod, and it granted that it was giving him away, but struggled to add that it did so only to save him. The sombre glow stared it at him till it fairly sounded out 'to save you, poor old man, to save you; to save you in spite of yourself'. Yet it was somehow just this communication that showed him to himself as more than ever lost. Still another result of it was to put before him as never yet that between his comrade and the interest represented by Sarah there was already a basis. Beyond all question now, yes: Waymarsh had been in occult relation with Mrs Newsome—out, out it all came in the very effort of his face. 'Yes, you're feeling my hand'—he as good as proclaimed it: 'but only because this at least I *shall* have got out of the damned Old World: that I shall have picked up the pieces into which it has caused you to crumble.' It was as if in short, after an instant, Strether had not only had it from him, but had recognised that so far as this went the instant had cleared the air. Our friend understood and approved; he had the sense that they wouldn't otherwise speak of it. This would be all, and it would mark in himself a kind of intelligent generosity. It was with grim Sarah then—Sarah grim for all her grace—that Waymarsh had begun at ten o'clock in the morning to save him. Well—if he *could*, poor dear man, with his big bleak kindness! The upshot of which crowded perception was that Strether, on his own side, still showed no more than he absolutely had to. He showed the least possible by

saying to Mrs Pocock after an interval much briefer than our glance at the picture reflected in him: 'Oh it's as true as they please!—There's no Miss Gostrey for any one but me—not the least little peep. I keep her to myself.'

'Well, it's very good of you to notify me,' Sarah replied without looking at him and thrown for a moment by this discrimination, as the direction of her eyes showed, upon a dimly desperate little community with Madame de Vionnet. 'But I hope I shan't miss her too much.'

Madame de Vionnet instantly rallied. 'And you know—though it might occur to one—it isn't in the least that he's ashamed of her. She's really—in a way—extremely good-looking.'

'Ah but extremely!' Strether laughed while he wondered at the odd part he found thus imposed on him.

It continued to be so by every touch from Madame de Vionnet. 'Well, as I say, you know, I wish you would keep *me* a little more to yourself. Couldn't you name some day for me, some hour—and better soon than late? I'll be at home whenever it best suits you. There—I can't say fairer.'

Strether thought a moment while Waymarsh and Mrs Pocock affected him as standing attentive. 'I did lately call on you. Last week—while Chad was out of town.'

'Yes—and I was away, as it happened, too. You choose your moments well. But don't wait for my next absence, for I shan't make another,' Madame de Vionnet declared, 'while Mrs Pocock's here.'

'That vow needn't keep you long, fortunately,' Sarah observed with reasserted suavity. 'I shall be at present but a short time in Paris. I have my plans for other countries. I meet a number of charming friends'—and her voice seemed to caress that description of these persons.

'Ah then,' her visitor cheerfully replied, 'all the more reason! To-morrow, for instance, or next day?' she continued to Strether. 'Tuesday would do for me beautifully.'

'Tuesday then with pleasure.'

'And at half-past five—or at six?'

It was ridiculous, but Mrs Pocock and Waymarsh struck

him as fairly waiting for his answer. It was indeed as if they were arranged, gathered for a performance, the performance of 'Europe' by his confederate and himself. Well, the performance could only go on. 'Say five forty-five.'

'Five forty-five—good.' And now at last Madame de Vionnet must leave them, though it carried, for herself, the performance a little further. 'I *did* hope so much also to see Miss Pocock. Mayn't I still?'

Sarah hesitated, but she rose equal. 'She'll return your visit with me. She's at present out with Mr Pocock and my brother.'

'I see—of course Mr Newsome has everything to show them. He has told me of much about her. My great desire's to give my daughter the opportunity of making her acquaintance. I'm always on the look-out for such chances for her. If I didn't bring her to-day it was only to make sure first that you'd let me.' After which the charming woman risked a more intense appeal. 'It wouldn't suit *you* also to mention some near time, so that we shall be sure not to lose you?' Strether on his side waited, for Sarah likewise had, after all, to perform; and it occupied him to have been thus reminded that she had stayed at home—and on her first morning of Paris—while Chad led the others forth. Oh she was up to her eyes; if she had stayed at home she had stayed by an understanding, arrived at the evening before, that Waymarsh would come and find her alone. This was beginning well—for a first day in Paris; and the thing might be amusing yet. But Madame de Vionnet's earnestness was meanwhile beautiful. 'You may think me indiscreet, but I've *such* a desire my Jeanne shall know an American girl of the really delightful kind. You see I throw myself for it on your charity.'

The manner of this speech gave Strether such a sense of depths below it and behind it as he hadn't yet had—ministered in a way that almost frightened him to his dim divinations of reasons; but if Sarah still, in spite of it, faltered, this was why he had time for a sign of sympathy with her petitioner. 'Let me say then, dear lady, to back

your plea, that Miss Mamie is of the most delightful kind of all—is charming among the charming.'

Even Waymarsh, though with more to produce on the subject, could get into motion in time. 'Yes, Countess, the American girl's a thing that your country must at least allow ours the privilege to say we *can* show you. But her full beauty is only for those who know how to make use of her.'

'Ah then,' smiled Madame de Vionnet, 'that's exactly what I want to do. I'm sure she has much to teach us.'

It was wonderful, but what was scarce less so was that Strether found himself, by the quick effect of it, moved another way. 'Oh that may be! But don't speak of your own exquisite daughter, you know, as if she weren't pure perfection. *I* at least won't take that from you. Mademoiselle de Vionnet,' he explained, in considerable form, to Mrs Pocock, '*is* pure perfection. Mademoiselle de Vionnet *is* exquisite.'

It had been perhaps a little portentous, but 'Ah?' Sarah simply glittered.

Waymarsh himself, for that matter, apparently recognised, in respect to the facts, the need of a larger justice, and he had with it an inclination to Sarah. 'Miss Jane's strikingly handsome—in the regular French style.'

It somehow made both Strether and Madame de Vionnet laugh out, though at the very moment he caught in Sarah's eyes, as glancing at the speaker, a vague but unmistakable 'You too?' It made Waymarsh in fact look consciously over her head. Madame de Vionnet meanwhile, however, made her point in her own way. 'I wish indeed I could offer you my poor child as a dazzling attraction: it would make one's position simple enough! She's as good as she can be, but of course she's different, and the question is now—in the light of the way things seem to go—if she isn't after all *too* different: too different I mean from the splendid type every one is so agreed that your wonderful country produces. On the other hand of course Mr Newsome, who knows it so well, has, as a good friend, dear kind man that he is, done

everything he can—to keep us from fatal benightedness—for my small shy creature. Well,' she wound up after Mrs Pocock had signified, in a murmur still a little stiff, that she would speak to her own young charge on the question—'well, we shall sit, my child and I, and wait and wait and wait for you.' But her last fine turn was for Strether. 'Do speak of us in such a way——!'

'As that something can't but come of it? Oh something *shall* come of it! I take a great interest!' he further declared; and in proof of it, the next moment, he had gone with her down to her carriage.

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BOOK NINTH

I

'THE DIFFICULTY is,' Strether said to Madame de Vionnet a couple of days later, 'that I can't surprise them into the smallest sign of his not being the same old Chad they've been for the last three years glowering at across the sea. They simply won't give any, and as a policy, you know —what you call a *parti pris*, a deep game—that's positively remarkable.'

It was so remarkable that our friend had pulled up before his hostess with the vision of it; he had risen from his chair at the end of ten minutes and begun, as a help not to worry, to move about her quite as he moved before Maria. He had kept his appointment with her to the minute and had been intensely impatient, though divided in truth between the sense of having everything to tell her and the sense of having nothing at all. The short interval had, in the face of their complication, multiplied his impressions—it being meanwhile to be noted, moreover, that he already frankly, already most publicly, viewed the complication as common to them. If Madame de Vionnet, under Sarah's eyes, had pulled him into her boat, there was by this time no doubt whatever that he had remained in it and that what he had really most been conscious of for many hours together was the movement of the vessel itself. They were in it together this moment as they hadn't yet been, and he hadn't at present uttered the least of the words of alarm or remonstrance that had died on his lips at the hotel. He had other things to say to her than that she had put him in a position; so quickly had his position grown to affect him as quite excitingly, altogether richly, inevitable. That the outlook, however—given the point of exposure—hadn't cleared up

half so much as he had reckoned was the first warning she received from him on his arrival. She had replied with indulgence that he was in too great a hurry, and had remarked soothingly that if she knew how to be patient surely *he* might be. He felt her presence, on the spot, he felt her tone and everything about her, as an aid to that effort; and it was perhaps one of the proofs of her success with him that he seemed so much to take his ease while they talked. By the time he had explained to her why his impressions, though multiplied, still baffled him, it was as if he had been familiarly talking for hours. They baffled him because Sarah —well, Sarah was deep; deeper than she had ever yet had a chance to show herself. He didn't say that this was partly the effect of her opening so straight down, as it were, into her mother, and that, given Mrs Newsome's profundity, the shaft thus sunk might well have a reach; but he wasn't without a resigned apprehension that, at such a rate of confidence between the two women, he was likely soon to be moved to show how already, at moments, it had been for him as if he were dealing directly with Mrs Newsome. Sarah, to a certainty, would have begun herself to feel it in him—and this naturally put it in her power to torment him the more. From the moment she knew he *could* be tormented!

'But *why* can you be?'—his companion was surprised at his use of the word.

'Because I'm made so—I think of everything.'

'Ah one must never do that,' she smiled. 'One must think of as few things as possible.'

'Then,' he answered, 'one must pick them out right. But all I mean is—for I express myself with violence—that she's in a position to watch me. There's an element of suspense for me, and she can see me wriggle. But my wriggling doesn't matter,' he pursued. 'I can bear it. Besides, I shall wriggle out.'

The picture at any rate stirred in her an appreciation that he felt to be sincere. 'I don't see how a man can be kinder to a woman than you are to me.'

Well, kind was what he wanted to be; yet even while her charming eyes rested on him with the truth of this he none the less had his humour of honesty. 'When I say suspense I mean, you know,' he laughed, 'suspense about my own case too!'

'Oh yes—about your own case too!' It diminished his magnanimity, but she only looked at him the more tenderly.

'Not, however,' he went on, 'that I want to talk to you about that. It's my own little affair, and I mentioned it simply as part of Mrs Pocock's advantage.' No, no; though there was a queer present temptation in it, and his suspense was so real that to fidget was a relief, he wouldn't talk to her about Mrs Newsome, wouldn't work off on her the anxiety produced in him by Sarah's calculated omissions of reference. The effect she produced of representing her mother had been produced—and that was just the immense, the uncanny part of it—without her having so much as mentioned that lady. She had brought no message, had alluded to no question, had only answered his inquiries with hopeless limited propriety. She had invented a way of meeting them—as if he had been a polite perfunctory poor relation, of distant degree—that made them almost ridiculous in him. He couldn't, moreover, on his own side ask much without appearing to publish how he had lately lacked news; a circumstance of which it was Sarah's profound policy not to betray a suspicion. These things, all the same, he wouldn't breathe to Madame de Vionnet—much as they might make him walk up and down. And what he didn't say—as well as what *she* didn't, for she had also her high decencies—enhanced the effect of his being there with her at the end of ten minutes more intimately on the basis of saving her than he had yet had occasion to be. It ended in fact by being quite beautiful between them, the number of things they had a manifest consciousness of not saying. He would have liked to turn her, critically, to the subject of Mrs Pocock, but he so stuck to the line he felt to be the point of honour and of delicacy that he scarce even asked her what her personal impression had been. He knew it, for

that matter, without putting her to trouble: that she wondered how, with such elements, Sarah could still have no charm, was one of the principal things she held her tongue about. Strether would have been interested in her estimate of the elements—indubitably there, some of them, and to be appraised according to taste—but he denied himself even the luxury of this diversion. The way Madame de Vionnet affected him to-day was in itself a kind of demonstration of the happy employment of gifts. How could a woman think Sarah had charm who struck one as having arrived at it herself by such different roads? On the other hand of course Sarah wasn't obliged to have it. He felt as if somehow Madame de Vionnet *was*. The great question meanwhile was what Chad thought of his sister; which was naturally ushered in by that of Sarah's apprehension of Chad. *That* they could talk of, and with a freedom purchased by their discretion in other directions. The difficulty however was that they were reduced as yet to conjecture. He had given them in the day or two as little of a lead as Sarah, and Madame de Vionnet mentioned that she hadn't seen him since his sister's arrival.

'And does that strike you as such an age?'

She met it in all honesty. 'Oh I won't pretend I don't miss him. Sometimes I see him every day. Our friendship's like that. Make what you will of it!' she whimsically smiled; a little flicker of the kind, occasional in her, that had more than once moved him to wonder what he might best make of *her*. 'But he's perfectly right,' she hastened to add, 'and I wouldn't have him fail in any way at present for the world. I'd sooner not see him for three months. I begged him to be beautiful to them, and he fully feels it for himself.'

Strether turned away under his quick perception; she was so odd a mixture of lucidity and mystery. She fell in at moments with the theory about her he most cherished, and she seemed at others to blow it into air. She spoke now as if her art were all an innocence, and then again as if her innocence were all an art. 'Oh he's giving himself up, and

he'll do so to the end. How can he but want, now that it's within reach, his full impression?—which is much more important, you know, than either yours or mine. But he's just soaking,' Strether said as he came back; 'he's going in conscientiously for a saturation. I'm bound to say he *is* very good.'

'Ah,' she quietly replied, 'to whom do you say it?' And then more quietly still: 'He's capable of anything.'

Strether more than reaffirmed—'Oh he's excellent. I more and more like,' he insisted, 'to see him with them'; though the oddity of this tone between them grew sharper for him even while they spoke. It placed the young man so before them as the result of her interest and the product of her genius, acknowledged so her part in the phenomenon and made the phenomenon so rare, that more than ever yet he might have been on the very point of asking her for some more detailed account of the whole business than he had yet received from her. The occasion almost forced upon him some question as to how she had managed and as to the appearance such miracles presented from her own singularly close place of survey. The moment in fact however passed, giving way to more present history, and he continued simply to mark his appreciation of the happy truth. 'It's a tremendous comfort to feel how one can trust him.' And then again while for a little she said nothing—as if after all to *her* trust there might be a special limit: 'I mean for making a good show to them.'

'Yes,' she thoughtfully returned—'but if they shut their eyes to it!'

Strether for an instant had his own thought. 'Well, perhaps that won't matter!'

'You mean because he probably—do what they will—won't like them?'

'Oh "do what they will"——! They won't do much; especially if Sarah hasn't more—well, more than one has yet made out—to give.'

Madame de Vionnet weighed it. 'Ah she has all her grace!' It was a statement over which, for a little, they

could look at each other sufficiently straight, and though it produced no protest from Strether the effect was somehow as if he had treated it as a joke. 'She may be persuasive and caressing with him; she may be eloquent beyond words. She may get hold of him,' she wound up—'well, as neither you nor I have.'

'Yes, she *may*'—and now Strether smiled. 'But he has spent all his time each day with Jim. He's still showing Jim round.'

She visibly wondered. 'Then how about Jim?'

Strether took a turn before he answered. 'Hasn't he given you Jim? Hasn't he before this "done" him for you?' He was a little at a loss. 'Doesn't he tell you things?'

She hesitated. 'No'—and their eyes once more gave and took. 'Not as you do. You somehow make me see them—or at least feel them. And I haven't asked too much,' she added; 'I've of late wanted so not to worry him.'

'Ah for that, so have I,' he said with encouraging assent; so that—as if she had answered everything—they were briefly sociable on it. It threw him back on his other thought, with which he took another turn; stopping again, however, presently with something of a glow. 'You see Jim's really immense. I think it will be Jim who'll do it.'

She wondered. 'Get hold of him?'

'No—just the other thing. Counteract Sarah's spell.' And he showed now, our friend, how far he had worked it out. 'Jim's intensely cynical.'

'Oh dear Jim!' Madame de Vionnet vaguely smiled.

'Yes, literally—dear Jim! He's awful. What *he* wants, heaven forgive him, is to help us.'

'You mean'—she was eager—'help *me*?'

'Well, Chad and me in the first place. But he throws you in too, though without as yet seeing you much. Only so far as he does see you—if you don't mind—he sees you as awful.'

'"Awful"?'—she wanted it all.

'A regular bad one—though of course of a tremendously superior kind. Dreadful, delightful, irresistible.'

'Ah dear Jim! I should like to know him. I *must*.'

'Yes, naturally. But will it do? You may, you know,' Strether suggested, 'disappoint him.'

She was droll and humble about it. 'I can but try. But my wickedness then,' she went on, 'is my recommendation for him?'

'Your wickedness and the charms with which, in such a degree as yours, he associates it. He understands, you see, that Chad and I have above all wanted to have a good time, and his view is simple and sharp. Nothing will persuade him—in the light, that is, of my behaviour—that I really didn't, quite as much as Chad, come over to have one before it was too late. He wouldn't have expected it of me; but men of my age, at Woollett—and especially the least likely ones—have been noted as liable to strange outbreaks, belated uncanny clutches at the unusual, the ideal. It's an effect that a lifetime of Woollett has quite been observed as having; and I thus give it to you, in Jim's view, for what it's worth. Now his wife and his mother-in-law,' Strether continued to explain, 'have, as in honour bound, no patience with such phenomena, late or early—which puts Jim, as against his relatives, on the other side. Besides,' he added, 'I don't think he really wants Chad back. If Chad doesn't come——'

'He'll have'—Madame de Vionnet quite apprehended—'more of the free hand?'

'Well, Chad's the bigger man.'

'So he'll work now *en dessous*, to keep him quiet?'

'No—he won't "work" at all, and he won't do anything *en dessous*. He's very decent and won't be a traitor in the camp. But he'll be amused with his own little view of our duplicity, he'll sniff up what he supposes to be Paris from morning till night, and he'll be, as to the rest, for Chad—well, just what he is.'

She thought it over. 'A warning?'

He met it almost with glee. 'You *are* as wonderful as everybody says!' And then to explain all he meant: 'I drove him about for his first hour, and do you know what—all

beautifully unconscious—he most put before me? Why that something like *that* is at bottom, as an improvement to his present state, as in fact the real redemption of it, what they think it may not be too late to make of our friend.' With which, as, taking it in, she seemed, in her recurrent alarm, bravely to gaze at the possibility, he completed his statement. 'But it *is* too late. Thanks to you!'

It drew from her again one of her indefinite reflexions. 'Oh "me"—after all!'

He stood before her so exhilarated by his demonstration that he could fairly be jocular. 'Everything's comparative. You're better than *that*.'

'You'—she could but answer him—'are better than anything.' But she had another thought. '*Will* Mrs Pocock come to me?'

'Oh yes—she'll do that. As soon, that is, as my friend Waymarsh—*her* friend now—leaves her leisure.'

She showed an interest. 'Is he so much her friend as that?'

'Why, didn't you see it all at the hotel?'

'Oh'—she was amused—' "all" is a good deal to say. I don't know—I forget. I lost myself in *her*.'

'You were splendid,' Strether returned—'but "all" isn't a good deal to say: it's only a little. Yet it's charming so far as it goes. She wants a man to herself.'

'And hasn't she got *you*?'

'Do you think she looked at me—or even at you—as if she had?' Strether easily dismissed that irony. 'Every one, you see, must strike her as having somebody. You've got Chad—and Chad has got you.'

'I see'—she made of it what she could. 'And you've got Maria.'

Well, he on his side accepted that. 'I've got Maria. And Maria has got me. So it goes.'

'But Mr Jim—whom has he got?'

'Oh he has got—or it's as *if* he had—the whole place.'

'But for Mr Waymarsh'—she recalled—'isn't Miss Barrace before any one else?'

He shook his head. 'Miss Barrace is a *raffinée*, and her amusement won't lose by Mrs Pocock. It will gain rather—especially if Sarah triumphs and she comes in for a view of it.'

'How well you know us!' Madame de Vionnet, at this, frankly sighed.

'No—it seems to me it's we that I know. I know Sarah—it's perhaps on that ground only that my feet are firm. Waymarsh will take her round while Chad takes Jim—and I shall be, I assure you, delighted for both of them. Sarah will have had what she requires—she will have paid her tribute to the ideal; and he will have done about the same. In Paris it's in the air—so what can one do less? If there's a point that, beyond any other, Sarah wants to make, it's that she didn't come out to be narrow. We shall feel at least that.'

'Oh,' she sighed, 'the quantity we seem likely to "feel"! But what becomes, in these conditions, of the girl?'

'Of Mamie—if we're all provided? Ah for that,' said Strether, 'you can trust Chad.'

'To be, you mean, all right to her?'

'To pay her every attention as soon as he has polished off Jim. He wants what Jim can give him—and what Jim really won't—though he has had it all, and more than all, from me. He wants in short his own personal impression, and he'll get it—strong. But as soon as he has got it Mamie won't suffer.'

'Oh, Mamie mustn't *suffer!*' Madame de Vionnet soothingly emphasised.

But Strether could reassure her. 'Don't fear. As soon as he has done with Jim, Jim will fall to me. And then you'll see.'

It was as if in a moment she saw already; yet she still waited. Then, 'Is she really quite charming?' she asked.

He had got up with his last words and gathered in his hat and gloves. 'I don't know; I'm watching. I'm studying the case, as it were—and I daresay I shall be able to tell you.'

She wondered. 'Is it a case?'

'Yes—I think so. At any rate I shall see.'

'But haven't you known her before?'

'Yes,' he smiled—'but somehow at home she wasn't a case. She has become one since.' It was as if he made it out for himself. 'She has become one here.'

'So very very soon?'

He measured it, laughing. 'Not sooner than I did.'

'And you became one——?'

'Very very soon. The day I arrived.'

Her intelligent eyes showed her thought of it. 'Ah but the day you arrived you met Maria. Whom has Miss Pocock met?'

He paused again, but he brought it out. 'Hasn't she met Chad?'

'Certainly—but not for the first time. He's an old friend.' At which Strether had a slow amused significant headshake that made her go on: 'You mean that for *her* at least he's a new person—that she sees him as different?'

'She sees him as different.'

'And how does she see him?'

Strether gave it up. 'How can one tell how a deep little girl sees a deep young man?'

'Is every one so deep? Is she too?'

'So it strikes me—deeper than I thought. But wait a little—between us we'll make it out. You'll judge for that matter yourself.'

Madame de Vionnet looked for the moment fairly bent on the chance. 'Then she *will* come with her?—I mean Mamie with Mrs Pocock?'

'Certainly. Her curiosity, if nothing else, will in any case work that. But leave it all to Chad.'

'Ah,' wailed Madame de Vionnet, turning away a little wearily, 'the things I leave to Chad!'

The tone of it made him look at her with a kindness that showed his vision of her suspense. But he fell back on his confidence. 'Oh well—trust him. Trust him all the way.' He had indeed no sooner so spoken than the queer displace-

ment of his point of view appeared again to come up for him in the very sound, which drew from him a short laugh, immediately checked. He became still more advisory. 'When they do come give them plenty of Miss Jeanne. Let Mamie see her well.'

She looked for a moment as if she placed them face to face. 'For Mamie to hate her?'

He had another of his corrective headshakes. 'Mamie won't. Trust *them*.'

She looked at him hard, and then as if it were what she must always come back to: 'It's *you* I trust. But I was sincere,' she said, 'at the hotel. I did, I do, want my child——'

'Well?' Strether waited with deference while she appeared to hesitate as to how to put it.

'Well, to do what she can for me.'

Strether for a little met her eyes on it; after which something that might have been unexpected to her came from him. 'Poor little duck!'

Not more expected for himself indeed might well have been her echo of it. 'Poor little duck! But she immensely wants herself,' she said, 'to see our friend's cousin.'

'Is that what she thinks her?'

'It's what we call the young lady.'

He thought again; then with a laugh: 'Well, your daughter will help you.'

And now at last he took leave of her, as he had been intending for five minutes. But she went part of the way with him, accompanying him out of the room and into the next and the next. Her noble old apartment offered a succession of three, the first two of which indeed, on entering, smaller than the last, but each with its faded and formal air, enlarged the office of the antechamber and enriched the sense of approach. Strether fancied them, liked them, and, passing through them with her more slowly now, met a sharp renewal of his original impression. He stopped, he looked back; the whole thing made a vista, which he found high melancholy and sweet—full, once more, of dim historic

shades, of the faint far-away cannon-roar of the great Empire. It was doubtless half the projection of his mind, but his mind was a thing that, among old waxed parquets, pale shades of pink and green, pseudo-classic candelabra, he had always needfully to reckon with. They could easily make him irrelevant. The oddity, the originality, the poetry —he didn't know what to call it—of Chad's connexion reaffirmed for him its romantic side. 'They ought to see this, you know. They *must*.'

'The Pococks?'—she looked about in deprecation; she seemed to see gaps he didn't.

'Mamie and Sarah—Mamie in particular.'

'My shabby old place? But *their* things——!'

'Oh their things! You were talking of what will do something for you——'

'So that it strikes you,' she broke in, 'that my poor place may? Oh,' she ruefully mused, 'that *would* be desperate!'

'Do you know what I wish?' he went on. 'I wish Mrs Newsome herself could have a look.'

She stared, missing a little his logic. 'It would make a difference?'

Her voice was so earnest that as he continued to look about he laughed. 'It might!'

'But you've told her, you tell me——'

'All about you? Yes, a wonderful story. But there's all the indescribable—what one gets only on the spot.'

'Thank you!' she charmingly and sadly smiled.

'It's all about me here,' he freely continued. 'Mrs Newsome feels things.'

But she seemed doomed always to come back to doubt. 'No one feels so much as *you*. No—not any one.'

'So much the worse then for every one. It's very easy.'

They were by this time in the antechamber, still alone together, as she hadn't rung for a servant. The antechamber was high and square, grave and suggestive too, a little cold and slippery even in summer, and with a few old prints that were precious, Strether divined, on the walls. He stood in the middle, slightly lingering, vaguely directing his glasses,

while, leaning against the door-post of the room, she gently pressed her cheek to the side of the recess. '*You* would have been a friend.'

'I?'—it started him a little.

'For the reason you say. You're not stupid.' And then abruptly, as if bringing it out were somehow founded on that fact, 'We're marrying Jeanne.'

It affected him on the spot as a move in a game, and he was even then not without the sense that that wasn't the way Jeanne should be married. But he quickly showed his interest, though—as quickly afterwards struck him—with an absurd confusion of mind. '"You"? You and—a—not Chad?' Of course it was the child's father who made the "we", but to the child's father it would have cost him an effort to allude. Yet didn't it seem the next minute that Monsieur de Vionnet was after all not in the question?—since she had gone on to say that it was indeed to Chad she referred and that he had been in the whole matter kindness itself.

'If I must tell you all, it is he himself who has put us in the way. I mean in the way of an opportunity that, so far as I can yet see, is all I could possibly have dreamed of. For all the trouble Monsieur de Vionnet will ever take!' It was the first time she had spoken to him of her husband, and he couldn't have expressed how much more intimate with her it suddenly made him feel. It wasn't much, in truth—there were other things in what she was saying that were far more; but it was as if, while they stood there together so easily in these cold chambers of the past, the single touch had shown the reach of her confidence. 'But our friend,' she asked, 'hasn't then told you?'

'He has told me nothing.'

'Well, it has come with rather a rush—all in a very few days; and hasn't moreover yet taken a form that permits an announcement. It's only for you—absolutely you alone—that I speak; I so want you to know.' The sense he had so often had, since the first hour of his disembarkment, of being further and further 'in', treated him again at this

moment to another twinge; but in this wonderful way of her putting him in there continued to be something exquisitely remorseless. 'Monsieur de Vionnet will accept what he *must* accept. He has proposed half a dozen things—each one more impossible than the other; and he wouldn't have found this if he lives to a hundred. Chad found it,' she continued with her lighted, faintly flushed, her conscious confidential face, 'in the quietest way in the world. Or rather it found *him*—for everything finds him; I mean finds him right. You'll think we do such things strangely—but at my age,' she smiled, 'one has to accept one's conditions. Our young man's people had seen her; one of his sisters, a charming woman—we know all about them—had observed her somewhere with me. She had spoken to her brother—turned him on; and we were again observed, poor Jeanne and I, without our in the least knowing it. It was at the beginning of the winter; it went on for some time; it outlasted our absence; it began again on our return; and it luckily seems all right. The young man had met Chad, and he got a friend to approach him—as having a decent interest in us. Mr Newsome looked well before he leaped; he kept beautifully quiet and satisfied himself fully; then only he spoke. It's what has for some time past occupied us. It seems as if it were what would do; really, really all one could wish. There are only two or three points to be settled —they depend on her father. But this time I think we're safe.'

Strether, consciously gaping a little, had fairly hung upon her lips. 'I hope so with all my heart.' And then he permitted himself: 'Does nothing depend on *her*?'

'Ah naturally; everything did. But she's pleased *comme tout*. She has been perfectly free; and he—our young friend —is really a combination. I quite adore him.'

Strether just made sure. 'You mean your future son-in-law?'

'Future if we all bring it off.'

'Ah well,' said Strether, decorously, 'I heartily hope you may.' There seemed little else for him to say, though her

communication had the oddest effect on him. Vaguely and confusedly he was troubled by it; feeling as if he had even himself been concerned in something deep and dim. He had allowed for depths, but these were greater: and it was as if, oppressively—indeed absurdly—he was responsible for what they had now thrown up to the surface. It was—through something ancient and cold in it—what he would have called the real thing. In short his hostess's news, though he couldn't have explained why, was a sensible shock, and his oppression a weight he felt he must somehow or other immediately get rid of. There were too many connexions missing to make it tolerable he should do anything else. He was prepared to suffer—before his own inner tribunal—for Chad; he was prepared to suffer even for Madame de Vionnet. But he wasn't prepared to suffer for the little girl. So now having said the proper thing, he wanted to get away. She held him an instant, however, with another appeal.

'Do I seem to you very awful?'

'Awful? Why so?' But he called it to himself, even as he spoke, his biggest insincerity yet.

'Our arrangements are so different from yours.'

'Mine?' Oh he could dismiss that too! 'I haven't any arrangements.'

'Then you must accept mine; all the more that they're excellent. They're founded on a *vieille sagesse.* There will be much more, if all goes well, for you to hear and to know, and everything, believe me, for you to like. Don't be afraid; you'll be satisfied.' Thus she could talk to him of what, of her innermost life—for that was what it came to—he must 'accept'; thus she could extraordinarily speak as if in such an affair his being satisfied had an importance. It was all a wonder and made the whole case larger. He had struck himself at the hotel, before Sarah and Waymarsh, as being in her boat; but where on earth was he now? This question was in the air till her own lips quenched it with another. 'And do you suppose *he*—who loves her so—would do anything reckless or cruel?'

He wondered what he supposed. 'Do you mean your young man——?'

'I mean yours. I mean Mr Newsome.' It flashed for Strether the next moment a finer light, and the light deepened as she went on. 'He takes, thank God, the truest tenderest interest in her.'

It deepened indeed. 'Oh I'm sure of that!'

'You were talking,' she said, 'about one's trusting him. You see then how I do.'

He wanted a moment—it all came. 'I see—I see.' He felt he really did see.

'He wouldn't hurt her for the world, nor—assuming she marries at all—risk anything that might make against her happiness. And—willingly, at least—he would never hurt *me*.'

Her face, with what he had by this time grasped, told him more than her words; whether something had come into it, or whether he only read clearer, her whole story—what at least he then took for such—reached out to him from it. With the initiative she now attributed to Chad it all made a sense, and this sense—a light, a lead, was what had abruptly risen before him. He wanted, once more, to get off with these things; which was at last made easy, a servant having, for his assistance, on hearing voices in the hall, just come forward. All that Strether had made out was, while the man opened the door and impersonally waited, summed up in his last word. 'I don't think, you know, Chad will tell me anything.'

'No—perhaps not yet.'

'And I won't as yet speak to him.'

'Ah that's as you'll think best. You must judge.'

She had finally given him her hand, which he held a moment. 'How *much* I have to judge!'

'Everything,' said Madame de Vionnet: a remark that was indeed—with the refined disguised suppressed passion of her face—what he most carried away.

II

SO FAR as a direct approach was concerned Sarah had neglected him, for the week now about to end, with a civil consistency of chill that, giving him a higher idea of her social resource, threw him back on the general reflexion that a woman could always be amazing. It indeed helped a little to console him that he felt sure she had for the same period also left Chad's curiosity hanging; though on the other hand, for his personal relief, Chad could at least go through the various motions—and he made them extraordinarily numerous—of seeing she had a good time. There wasn't a motion on which, in her presence, poor Strether could so much as venture, and all he could do when he was out of it was to walk over for a talk with Maria. He walked over of course much less than usual, but he found a special compensation in a certain half-hour during which, toward the close of a crowded empty expensive day, his several companions seemed to him so disposed of as to give his forms and usages a rest. He had been with them in the morning and had nevertheless called on the Pococks in the afternoon; but their whole group, he then found, had dispersed after a fashion of which it would amuse Miss Gostrey to hear. He was sorry again, gratefully sorry she was so out of it—she who had really put him in; but she had fortunately always her appetite for news. The pure flame of the disinterested burned in her cave of treasures as a lamp in a Byzantine vault. It was just now, as happened, that for so fine a sense as hers a near view would have begun to pay. Within three days, precisely, the situation on which he was to report had shown signs of an equilibrium; the effect of his look in at the hotel was to confirm this appearance. If the equilibrium might only prevail! Sarah was out with Waymarsh, Mamie was out with Chad, and Jim was out alone. Later on indeed he himself was booked to Jim, was

to take him that evening to the Varieties—which Strether was careful to pronounce as Jim pronounced them.

Miss Gostrey drank it in. 'What then to-night do the others do?'

'Well, it has been arranged. Waymarsh takes Sarah to dine at Bignon's.'

She wondered. 'And what do they do after? They can't come straight home.'

'No, they can't come straight home—at least Sarah can't. It's their secret, but I think I've guessed it.' Then as she waited: 'The circus.'

It made her stare a moment longer, then laugh almost to extravagance. 'There's no one like you!'

'Like *me*?'—he only wanted to understand.

'Like all of you together—like all of us: Woollett, Milrose and their products. We're abysmal—but may we never be less so! Mr Newsome,' she continued, 'meanwhile takes Miss Pocock——?'

'Precisely—to the Français: to see what *you* took Waymarsh and me to, a family-bill.'

'Ah then may Mr Chad enjoy it as I did!' But she saw so much in things. 'Do they spend their evenings, your young people, like that, alone together?'

'Well, they're young people—but they're old friends.'

'I see, I see. And do *they* dine—for a difference—at Brébant's?'

'Oh where they dine is their secret, too. But I've my idea that it will be, very quietly, at Chad's own place.'

'She'll come to him there alone?'

They looked at each other a moment. 'He has known her from a child. Besides,' said Strether with emphasis, 'Mamie's remarkable. She's splendid.'

She wondered. 'Do you mean she expects to bring it off?'

'Getting hold of him? No—I think not.'

'She doesn't want him enough?—or doesn't believe in her power?' On which as he said nothing she continued: 'She finds she doesn't care for him?'

'No—I think she finds she does. But that's what I mean

by so describing her. It's *if* she does that she's splendid. But we'll see,' he wound up, 'where she comes out.'

'You seem to show me sufficiently,' Miss Gostrey laughed, 'where she goes in! But is her childhood's friend,' she asked, 'permitting himself recklessly to flirt with her?'

'No—not that. Chad's also splendid. They're *all* splendid!' he declared with a sudden strange sound of wistfulness and envy. 'They're at least *happy*.'

'Happy?'—it appeared, with their various difficulties, to surprise her.

'Well—I seem to myself among them the only one who isn't.'

She demurred. 'With your constant tribute to the ideal?'

He had a laugh at his tribute to the ideal, but he explained after a moment his impression. 'I mean they're living. They're rushing about. I've already had my rushing. I'm waiting.'

'But aren't you,' she asked by way of cheer, 'waiting with *me*?'

He looked at her in all kindness. 'Yes—if it weren't for that!'

'And you help me to wait,' she said. 'However,' she went on, 'I've really something for you that will help you to wait and which you shall have in a minute. Only there's something more I want from you first. I revel in Sarah.'

'So do I. If it weren't,' he again amusedly sighed, 'for *that*——!'

'Well, you owe more to women than any man I ever saw. We do seem to keep you going. Yet Sarah, as I see her, must be great.'

'She *is*'—Strether fully assented: 'great! Whatever happens, she won't, with these unforgettable days, have lived in vain.'

Miss Gostrey had a pause. 'You mean she has fallen in love?'

'I mean she wonders if she hasn't—and it serves all her purpose.'

'It has indeed,' Maria laughed, 'served women's purposes before!'

'Yes—for giving in. But I doubt if the idea—as an idea —has ever up to now answered so well for holding out. That's *her* tribute to the ideal—we each have our own. It's her romance—and it seems to me better on the whole than mine. To have it in Paris too,' he explained—'on this classic ground, in this charged infectious air, with so sudden an intensity: well, it's more than she expected. She has had in short to recognise the breaking out for her of a real affinity—and with everything to enhance the drama.'

Miss Gostrey followed. 'Jim, for instance?'

'Jim. Jim hugely enhances. Jim was made to enhance. And then Mrs Waymarsh. It's the crowning touch—it supplies the colour. He's positively separated.'

'And she herself unfortunately isn't—that supplies the colour too.' Miss Gostrey was all there. But somehow——! 'Is *he* in love?'

Strether looked at her a long time; then looked all about the room; then came a little nearer. 'Will you never tell any one in the world as long as ever you live?'

'Never.' It was charming.

'He thinks Sarah really is. But he has no fear,' Strether hastened to add.

'Of her being affected by it?'

'Of *his* being. He likes it, but he knows she can hold out. He's helping her, he's floating her over, by kindness.'

Maria rather funnily considered it. 'Floating her over in champagne? The kindness of dining her, nose to nose, at the hour when all Paris is crowding to profane delights, and in the—well, in the great temple, as one hears of it, of pleasure?'

'That's just *it*, for both of them,' Strether insisted—'and all of a supreme innocence. The Parisian place, the feverish hour, the putting before her of a hundred francs' worth of food and drink, which they'll scarcely touch—all that's the dear man's own romance; the expensive kind, expensive in francs and centimes, in which he abounds. And the circus

afterwards—which is cheaper, but which he'll find some means of making as dear as possible—that's also *his* tribute to the ideal. It does for him. He'll see her through. They won't talk of anything worse than you and me.'

'Well, we're bad enough perhaps, thank heaven,' she laughed, 'to upset them! Mr Waymarsh at any rate is a hideous old coquette.' And the next moment she had dropped everything for a different pursuit. 'What you don't appear to know is that Jeanne de Vionnet has become engaged. She's to marry—it has been definitely arranged—young Monsieur de Montbron.'

He fairly blushed. 'Then—if you know it—it's "out"?'

'Don't I often know things that are *not* out? However,' she said, 'this will be out to-morrow. But I see I've counted too much on your possible ignorance. You've been before me, and I don't make you jump as I hoped.'

He gave a gasp at her insight.' You never fail! I've *had* my jump. I had it when I first heard.'

'Then if you knew why didn't you tell me as soon as you came in?'

'Because I had it from her as a thing not yet to be spoken of.'

Miss Gostrey wondered. 'From Madame de Vionnet herself?'

'As a probability—not quite a certainty: a good cause in which Chad has been working. So I've waited.'

'You need wait no longer,' she returned. 'It reached me yesterday—roundabout and accidental, but by a person who had had it from one of the young man's own people—as a thing quite settled. I was only keeping it for you.'

'You thought Chad wouldn't have told me?'

She hesitated. 'Well, if he hasn't——'

'He hasn't. And yet the thing appears to have been practically his doing. So there we are.'

'There we are!' Maria candidly echoed.

'That's why I jumped. I jumped,' he continued to explain, 'because it means, this disposition of the daughter,

that there's now nothing else: nothing else but him and the mother.'

'Still—it simplifies.'

'It simplifies'—he fully concurred. 'But that's precisely where we are. It marks a stage in his relation. The act is his answer to Mrs Newsome's demonstration.'

'It tells,' Maria asked, 'the worst?'

'The worst.'

'But is the worst what he wants Sarah to know?'

'He doesn't care for Sarah.'

At which Miss Gostrey's eyebrows went up. 'You mean she has already dished herself?'

Strether took a turn about; he had thought it out again and again before this, to the end; but the vista seemed each time longer. 'He wants his good friend to know the best. I mean the measure of his attachment. She asked for a sign, and he thought of that one. There it is.'

'A concession to her jealousy?'

Strether pulled up. 'Yes—call it that. Make it lurid—for that makes my problem richer.'

'Certainly, let us have it lurid—for I quite agree with you that we want none of our problems poor. But let us also have it clear. Can he, in the midst of such a preoccupation, or on the heels of it, have seriously cared for Jeanne? —cared, I mean, as a young man at liberty would have cared?'

Well, Strether had mastered it. 'I think he can have thought it would be charming if he *could* care. It would be nicer.'

'Nicer than being tied up to Marie?'

'Yes—than the discomfort of an attachment to a person he can never hope, short of a catastrophe, to marry. And he was quite right,' said Strether. 'It would certainly have been nicer. Even when a thing's already nice there mostly *is* some other thing that would have been nicer—or as to which we wonder if it wouldn't. But his question was all the same a dream. He *couldn't* care in that way. He *is* tied up to Marie. The relation is too special and has gone too

far. It's the very basis, and his recent lively contribution toward establishing Jeanne in life has been his definite and final acknowledgement to Madame de Vionnet that he has ceased squirming. I doubt meanwhile,' he went on, 'if Sarah has at all directly attacked him.'

His companion brooded. 'But won't he wish for his own satisfaction to make his ground good to her?'

'No—he'll leave it to me, he'll leave everything to me. I "sort of" feel'—he worked it out—'that the whole thing will come upon me. Yes, I shall have every inch and every ounce of it. I shall be *used* for it——!' And Strether lost himself in the prospect. Then he fancifully expressed the issue. 'To the last drop of my blood.'

Maria, however, roundly protested. 'Ah you'll please keep a drop for *me*. *I* shall have a use for it!'—which she didn't however follow up. She had come back the next moment to another matter. 'Mrs Pocock, with her brother, is trusting only to her general charm?'

'So it would seem.'

'And the charm's not working?'

Well, Strether put it otherwise. 'She's sounding the note of home—which is the very best thing she can do.'

'The best for Madame de Vionnet?'

'The best for home itself. The natural one; the right one.'

'Right,' Maria asked, 'when it fails?'

Strether had a pause. 'The difficulty's Jim. Jim's the note of home.'

She debated. 'Ah surely not the note of Mrs Newsome.'

But he had it all. 'The note of the home for which Mrs Newsome wants him—the home of the business. Jim stands, with his little legs apart, at the door of *that* tent; and Jim *is*, frankly speaking, extremely awful.'

Maria stared. 'And you in, you poor thing, for your evening with him?'

'Oh he's all right for *me!*' Strether laughed. 'Any one's good enough for *me*. But Sarah shouldn't, all the same, have brought him. She doesn't appreciate him.'

His friend was amused with this statement of it. 'Doesn't know, you mean, how bad he is?'

Strether shook his head with decision. 'Not really.'

She wondered. 'Then doesn't Mrs Newsome?'

It made him frankly do the same. 'Well, no—since you ask me.'

Maria rubbed it in. 'Not really either?'

'Not at all. She rates him rather high.' With which indeed, immediately, he himself took up. 'Well, he *is* good too, in his way. It depends on what you want him for.'

Miss Gostrey, however, wouldn't let it depend on anything—wouldn't have it, and wouldn't want him, at any price. 'It suits my book,' she said, 'that he should be impossible; and it suits it still better,' she more imaginatively added, 'that Mrs Newsome doesn't know he is.'

Strether, in consequence, had to take it from her, but he fell back on something else. 'I'll tell you who does really know.'

'Mr Waymarsh? Never!'

'Never indeed. I'm not *always* thinking of Mr Waymarsh; in fact I find now I never am.' Then he mentioned the person as if there were a good deal in it. 'Mamie.'

'His own sister?' Oddly enough it but let her down. 'What good will that do?'

'None perhaps. But there—as usual—we are!'

III

THERE THEY were yet again, accordingly, for two days more; when Strether, on being, at Mrs Pocock's hotel, ushered into that lady's salon, found himself at first assuming a mistake on the part of the servant, who had introduced him and retired. The occupants hadn't come in, for the room looked empty as only a room can look in Paris, of a fine afternoon, when the faint murmur of the huge collec-

tive life, carried on out of doors, strays among scattered objects even as a summer air idles in a lonely garden. Our friend looked about and hesitated; observed, on the evidence of a table charged with purchases and other matters, that Sarah had become possessed—by no aid from *him*—of the last number of the salmon-coloured Revue; noted further that Mamie appeared to have received a present of Fromentin's 'Maîtres d'Autrefois' from Chad, who had written her name on the cover; and pulled up at the sight of a heavy letter addressed in a hand he knew. This letter, forwarded by a banker and arriving in Mrs Pocock's absence, had been placed in evidence, and it drew from the fact of its being unopened a sudden queer power to intensify the reach of its author. It brought home to him the scale on which Mrs Newsome—for she had been copious indeed this time—was writing to her daughter while she kept *him* in durance; and it had altogether such an effect upon him as made him for a few minutes stand still and breathe low. In his own room, at his own hotel, he had dozens of well-filled envelopes superscribed in that character; and there was actually something in the renewal of his interrupted vision of the character that played straight into the so frequent question of whether he weren't already disinherited beyond appeal. It was such an assurance as the sharp downstrokes of her pen hadn't yet had occasion to give him; but they somehow at the present crisis stood for a probable absoluteness in any decree of the writer. He looked at Sarah's name and address, in short, as if he had been looking hard into her mother's face, and then turned from it as if the face had declined to relax. But since it was in a manner as if Mrs Newsome were thereby all the more, instead of the less, in the room, and were conscious, sharply and solely conscious, of himself, so he felt both held and hushed, summoned to stay at least and take his punishment. By staying, accordingly, he took it—creeping softly and vaguely about and waiting for Sarah to come in. She *would* come in if he stayed long enough, and he had now more than ever the sense of her success in leaving him a prey to anxiety. It wasn't to be denied that she

had had a happy instinct, from the point of view of Woollett, in placing him thus at the mercy of her own initiative. It was very well to try to say he didn't care—that she might break ground when she would, might never break it at all if she wouldn't, and that he had no confession whatever to wait upon her with: he breathed from day to day an air that damnably required clearing, and there were moments when he quite ached to precipitate that process. He couldn't doubt that, should she only oblige him by surprising him just as he then was, a clarifying scene of some sort would result from the concussion.

He humbly circulated in this spirit till he suddenly had a fresh arrest. Both the windows of the room stood open to the balcony, but it was only now that, in the glass of the leaf of one of them, folded back, he caught a reflexion quickly recognised as the colour of a lady's dress. Somebody had been then all the while on the balcony, and the person, whoever it might be, was so placed between the windows as to be hidden from him; while on the other hand the many sounds of the street had covered his own entrance and movements. If the person were Sarah he might on the spot therefore be served to his taste. He might lead her by a move or two up to the remedy for his vain tension; as to which, should he get nothing else from it, he would at least have the relief of pulling down the roof on their heads. There was fortunately no one at hand to observe—in respect to his valour—that even on this completed reasoning he still hung fire. He had been waiting for Mrs Pocock and the sound of the oracle; but he had to gird himself afresh—which he did in the embrasure of the window, neither advancing nor retreating—before provoking the revelation. It was apparently for Sarah to come more into view; he was in that case there at her service. She did, however, as meanwhile happened, come more into view; only she luckily came at the last minute as a contradiction of Sarah. The occupant of the balcony was after all quite another person, a person presented, on a second look, by a charming back and a slight shift of her position, as beautiful brilliant un-

conscious Mamie—Mamie alone at home, Mamie passing her time in her own innocent way, Mamie in short rather shabbily used, but Mamie absorbed interested and interesting. With her arms on the balustrade and her attention dropped to the street she allowed Strether to watch her, to consider several things, without her turning round.

But the oddity was that when he *had* so watched and considered he simply stepped back into the room without following up his advantage. He revolved there again for several minutes, quite as with something new to think of and as if the bearings of the possibility of Sarah had been superseded. For frankly, yes, it *had* bearings thus to find the girl in solitary possession. There was something in it that touched him to a point not to have been reckoned beforehand, something that softly but quite pressingly spoke to him, and that spoke the more each time he paused again at the edge of the balcony and saw her still unaware. Her companions were plainly scattered; Sarah would be off somewhere with Waymarsh and Chad off somewhere with Jim. Strether didn't at all mentally impute to Chad that he was with his 'good friend'; he gave him the benefit of supposing him involved in appearances that, had he had to describe them—for instance to Maria—he would have conveniently qualified as more subtle. It came to him indeed the next thing that there was perhaps almost an excess of refinement in having left Mamie in such weather up there alone, however she might in fact have extemporised, under the charm of the Rue de Rivoli, a little makeshift Paris of wonder and fancy. Our friend in any case now recognised —and it was as if at the recognition Mrs Newsome's fixed intensity had suddenly, with a deep audible gasp, grown thin and vague—that day after day he had been conscious in respect to his young lady of something odd and ambiguous, yet something into which he could at last read a meaning. It had been at the most, this mystery, an obsession agreeable; and it had just now fallen into its place as at the touch of a spring. It had represented the possibility between them of some communication baffled by accident

and delay—the possibility even of some relation as yet unacknowledged.

There was always their old relation, the fruit of the Woollett years; but that—and it was what was strangest—had nothing whatever in common with what was now in the air. As a child, as a 'bud', and then again as a flower of expansion, Mamie had bloomed for him, freely, in the almost incessantly open doorways of home; where he remembered her as first very forward, as then very backward—for he had carried on at one period, in Mrs Newsome's parlours (oh Mrs Newsome's phases and his own!) a course of English Literature re-enforced by exams and teas—and once more, finally, as very much in advance. But he had kept no great sense of points of contact; it not being in the nature of things at Woollett that the freshest of the buds should find herself in the same basket with the most withered of the winter apples. The child had given sharpness, above all, to his sense of the flight of time; it was but the day before yesterday that he had tripped up on her hoop, yet his experience of remarkable women—destined, it would seem, remarkably to grow—felt itself ready this afternoon, quite braced itself, to include her. She had in fine more to say to him than he had ever dreamed the pretty girl of the moment *could* have; and the proof of the circumstance was that, visibly, unmistakably, she had been able to say it to no one else. It was something she could mention neither to her brother, to her sister-in-law nor to Chad; though he could just imagine that had she still been at home she might have brought it out, as a supreme tribute to age, authority and attitude, for Mrs Newsome. It was moreover something in which they all took an interest; the strength of their interest was in truth just the reason of her prudence. All this then, for five minutes, was vivid to Strether, and it put before him that, poor child, she had now but her prudence to amuse her. That, for a pretty girl in Paris, struck him, with a rush, as a sorry state; so that under the impression he went out to her with a step as hypocritically alert, he was well aware, as if he had just come into the room. She

turned with a start at his voice; preoccupied with him though she might be, she was just a scrap disappointed. 'Oh I thought you were Mr Bilham!'

The remark had been at first surprising and our friend's private thought, under the influence of it, temporarily blighted; yet we are able to add that he presently recovered his inward tone and that many a fresh flower of fancy was to bloom in the same air. Little Bilham—since little Bilham was, somewhat incongruously, expected—appeared behindhand; a circumstance by which Strether was to profit. They came back into the room together after a little, the couple on the balcony, and amid its crimson-and-gold elegance, with the others still absent, Strether passed forty minutes that he appraised even at the time as far, in the whole queer connexion, from his idlest. Yes indeed, since he had the other day so agreed with Maria about the inspiration of the lurid, here was something for his problem that surely didn't make it shrink and that was floated in upon him as part of a sudden flood. He was doubtless not to know till afterwards, on turning them over in thought, of how many elements his impression was composed; but he none the less felt, as he sat with the charming girl, the signal growth of confidence. For she *was* charming, when all was said—and none the less so for the visible habit and practice of freedom and fluency. She was charming, he was aware, in spite of the fact that if he hadn't found her so he would have found her something he should have been in peril of expressing as 'funny'. Yes, she was funny, wonderful Mamie, and without dreaming it; she was bland, she was bridal—with never, that he could make out as yet, a bridegroom to support it; she was handsome and portly and easy and chatty, soft and sweet and almost disconcertingly reassuring. She was dressed, if we might so far discriminate, less as a young lady than as an old one—had an old one been supposable to Strether as so committed to vanity; the complexities of her hair missed moreover also the looseness of youth; and she had a mature manner of bending a little, as to encourage and reward, while she held neatly together

in front of her a pair of strikingly polished hands: the combination of all of which kept up about her the glamour of her 'receiving', placed her again perpetually between the windows and within sound of the ice-cream plates, suggested the enumeration of all the names, all the Mr Brookses and Mr Snookses, gregarious specimens of a single type, she was happy to 'meet'.

But if all this was where she was funny, and if what was funnier than the rest was the contrast between her beautiful benevolent patronage—such a hint of the polysyllabic as might make her something of a bore toward middle age—and her rather flat little voice, the voice, naturally, unaffectedly yet, of a girl of fifteen; so Strether, none the less, at the end of ten minutes, felt in her a quiet dignity that pulled things bravely together. If quiet dignity, almost more than matronly, with voluminous, too voluminous clothes, was the effect she proposed to produce, that was an ideal one could like in her when once one had got into relation. The great thing now for her visitor was that this was exactly what he had done; it made so extraordinary a mixture of the brief and crowded hour. It was the mark of a relation that he had begun so quickly to find himself sure she was, of all people, as might have been said, on the side and of the party of Mrs Newsome's original ambassador. She was in *his* interest and not in Sarah's; and some sign of that was precisely what he had been feeling in her, these last days, as imminent. Finally placed, in Paris, in immediate presence of the situation and of the hero of it—by whom Strether was incapable of meaning any one but Chad—she had accomplished, and really in a manner all unexpected to herself, a change of base; deep still things had come to pass within her, and by the time she had grown sure of them Strether had become aware of the little drama. When she knew where she was, in short, he had made it out; and he made it out at present still better; though with never a direct word passing between them all the while on the subject of his own predicament. There had been at first, as he sat there with her, a moment during which he wondered if she

meant to break ground in respect to his prime undertaking. That door stood so strangely ajar that he was half-prepared to be conscious, at any juncture, of her having, of any one's having, quite bounced in. But, friendly, familiar, light of touch and happy of tact, she exquisitely stayed out, so that it was for all the world as if to show she could deal with him without being reduced to—well, scarcely anything.

It fully came up for them then, by means of their talking of everything *but* Chad, that Mamie, unlike Sarah, unlike Jim, knew perfectly what had become of him. It fully came up that she had taken to the last fraction of an inch the measure of the change in him, and that she wanted Strether to know what a secret she proposed to make of it. They talked most conveniently—as if they had had no chance yet—about Woollett; and that had virtually the effect of their keeping the secret more close. The hour took on for Strether, little by little, a queer sad sweetness of quality; he had such a revulsion in Mamie's favour and on behalf of her social value as might have come from remorse at some early injustice. She made him, as under the breath of some vague western whiff, homesick and freshly restless; he could really for the time have fancied himself stranded with her on a far shore, during an ominous calm, in a quaint community of shipwreck. Their little interview was like a picnic on a coral strand; they passed each other, with melancholy smiles and looks sufficiently allusive, such cupfuls of water as they had saved. Especially sharp in Strether meanwhile was the conviction that his companion really knew, as we have hinted, where she had come out. It was at a very particular place—only *that* she would never tell him; it would be above all what he should have to puzzle for himself. This was what he hoped for, because his interest in the girl wouldn't be complete without it. No more would the appreciation to which she was entitled—so assured was he that the more he saw of her process the more he should see of her pride. She saw, herself, everything; but she knew what she didn't want, and

that it was that had helped her. What didn't she want?—there was a pleasure lost for her old friend in not yet knowing, as there would doubtless be a thrill in getting a glimpse. Gently and sociably she kept that dark to him, and it was as if she soothed and beguiled him in other ways to make up for it. She came out with her impression of Madame de Vionnet—of whom she had 'heard so much'; she came out with her impression of Jeanne, whom she had been 'dying to see': she brought it out with a blandness by which her auditor was really stirred that she had been with Sarah early that very afternoon, and after dreadful delays caused by all sorts of things, mainly, eternally, by the purchase of clothes—clothes that unfortunately wouldn't be themselves eternal—to call in the Rue de Bellechasse.

At the sound of these names Strether almost blushed to feel that he couldn't have sounded them first—and yet couldn't either have justified his squeamishness. Mamie made them easy as he couldn't have begun to do, and yet it could only have cost her more than he should ever have had to spend. It was as friends of Chad's, friends special, distinguished, desirable, enviable, that she spoke of them, and she beautifully carried it off that much as she had heard of them—though she didn't say how or where, which was a touch of her own—she had found them beyond her supposition. She abounded in praise of them, and after the manner of Woollett—which made the manner of Woollett a lovable thing again to Strether. He had never so felt the true inwardness of it as when his blooming companion pronounced the elder of the ladies of the Rue de Bellechasse too fascinating for words and declared of the younger that she was perfectly ideal, a real little monster of charm. 'Nothing,' she said of Jeanne, 'ought ever to happen to her—she's so awfully right as she is. Another touch will spoil her—so she oughtn't to *be* touched.'

'Ah but things, here in Paris,' Strether observed, 'do happen to little girls.' And then for the joke's and the occasion's sake: 'Haven't you found that yourself?'

'That things happen——? Oh I'm not a little girl. I'm a

big battered blowsy one. *I* don't care,' Mamie laughed, '*what* happens.'

Strether had a pause while he wondered if it mightn't happen that he should give her the pleasure of learning that he found her nicer than he had really dreamed—a pause that ended when he had said to himself that, so far as it at all mattered for her, she had in fact perhaps already made this out. He risked accordingly a different question—though conscious, as soon as he had spoken, that he seemed to place it in relation to her last speech. 'But that Mademoiselle de Vionnet is to be married—I suppose you've heard of *that*.'

For all, he then found, he need fear! 'Dear, yes; the gentleman was there: Monsieur de Montbron, whom Madame de Vionnet presented to us.'

'And was he nice?'

Mamie bloomed and bridled with her best reception manner. 'Any man's nice when he's in love.'

It made Strether laugh. 'But is Monsieur de Montbron in love—already—with *you*?'

'Oh that's not necessary—it's so much better he should be so with *her*: which, thank goodness, I lost no time in discovering for myself. He's perfectly gone—and I couldn't have borne it for her if he hadn't been. She's just too sweet.'

Strether hesitated. 'And through being in love too?'

On which with a smile that struck him as wonderful Mamie had a wonderful answer. 'She doesn't know if she is or not.'

It made him again laugh out. 'Oh but *you* do?'

She was willing to take it that way. 'Oh yes, I know everything.' And as she sat there rubbing her polished hands and making the best of it—only holding her elbows perhaps a little too much out—the momentary effect for Strether was that every one else, in all their affair, seemed stupid.

'Know that poor little Jeanne doesn't know what's the matter with her?'

It was as near as they came to saying that she was probably in love with Chad; but it was quite near enough for what Strether wanted; which was to be confirmed in his certitude that, whether in love or not, she appealed to something large and easy in the girl before him. Mamie would be fat, too fat, at thirty; but she would always be the person who, at the present sharp hour, had been disinterestedly tender. 'If I see a little more of her, as I hope I shall, I think she'll like me enough—for she seemed to like me today—to want me to tell her.'

'And *shall* you?'

'Perfectly. I shall tell her the matter with her is that she wants only too much to do right. To do right for her, naturally,' said Mamie 'is to please.'

'Her mother, do you mean?'

'Her mother first.'

Strether waited. 'And then?'

'Well, "then"—Mr Newsome.'

There was something really grand for him in the serenity of this reference. 'And last only Monsieur de Montbron?'

'Last only'—she good-humouredly kept it up.

Strether considered. 'So that every one after all then will be suited?'

She had one of her few hesitations, but it was a question only of a moment; and it was her nearest approach to being explicit with him about what was between them. 'I think I can speak for myself. *I* shall be.'

It said indeed so much, told such a story of her being ready to help him, so committed to him that truth, in short, for such use as he might make of it toward those ends of his own with which, patiently and trustfully, she had nothing to do—it so fully achieved all this that he appeared to himself simply to meet it in his own spirit by the last frankness of admiration. Admiration was of itself almost accusatory, but nothing less would serve to show her how nearly he understood. He put out his hand for good-bye with a 'Splendid, splendid, splendid!' And he left her, in her splendour, still waiting for little Bilham.

BOOK TENTH

I

STRETHER OCCUPIED beside little Bilham, three evenings after his interview with Mamie Pocock, the same deep divan they had enjoyed together on the first occasion of our friend's meeting Madame de Vionnet and her daughter in the apartment of the Boulevard Malesherbes, where his position affirmed itself again as ministering to an easy exchange of impressions. The present evening had a different stamp; if the company was much more numerous, so, inevitably, were the ideas set in motion. It was on the other hand, however, now strongly marked that the talkers moved, in respect to such matters, round an inner, a protected circle. They knew at any rate what really concerned them to-night, and Strether had begun by keeping his companion close to it. Only a few of Chad's guests had dined—that is fifteen or twenty, a few compared with the large concourse offered to sight by eleven o'clock; but number and mass, quantity and quality, light, fragrance, sound, the overflow of hospitality meeting the high tide of response, had all from the first pressed upon Strether's consciousness, and he felt himself somehow part and parcel of the most festive scene, as the term was, in which he had ever in his life been engaged. He had perhaps seen, on Fourths of July and on dear old domestic Commencements, more people assembled, but he had never seen so many in proportion to the space, or had at all events never known so great a promiscuity to show so markedly as picked. Numerous as was the company, it had still been made so by selection, and what was above all rare for Strether was that, by no fault of his own, he was in the secret of the principle that had worked. He hadn't inquired, he had averted his head, but

Chad put him a pair of questions that themselves smoothed the ground. He hadn't answered the questions, he had replied that they were the young man's own affair; and he had then seen perfectly that the latter's direction was already settled.

Chad had applied for counsel only by way of intimating that he knew what to do; and he had clearly never known it better than in now presenting to his sister the whole circle of his society. This was all in the sense and the spirit of the note struck by him on that lady's arrival; he had taken at the station itself a line that led him without a break, and that enabled him to lead the Pococks—though dazed a little, no doubt, breathless, no doubt, and bewildered—to the uttermost end of the passage accepted by them perforce as pleasant. He had made it for them violently pleasant and mercilessly full; the upshot of which was, to Strether's vision, that they had come all the way without discovering it to be really no passage at all. It was a brave blind alley, where to pass was impossible and where, unless they stuck fast, they would have—which was always awkward—publicly to back out. They were touching bottom assuredly to-night; the whole scene represented the terminus of the *cul-de-sac*. So could things go when there was a hand to keep them consistent—a hand that pulled the wire with a skill at which the elder man more and more marvelled. The elder man felt responsible, but he also felt successful, since what had taken place was simply the issue of his own contention, six weeks before, that they properly should wait to see what their friends would have really to say. He had determined Chad to wait, he had determined him to see; he was therefore not to quarrel with the time given up to the business. As much as ever, accordingly, now that a fortnight had elapsed, the situation created for Sarah, and against which she had raised no protest, was that of her having accommodated herself to her adventure as to a pleasure-party surrendered perhaps even somewhat in excess to bustle and to 'pace'. If her brother had been at any point the least bit open to criticism it might have been on the

ground of his spicing the draught too highly and pouring the cup too full. Frankly treating the whole occasion of the presence of his relatives as an opportunity for amusement, he left it, no doubt, but scant margin as an opportunity for anything else. He suggested, invented, abounded—yet all the while with the loosest easiest rein. Strether, during his own weeks, had gained a sense of knowing Paris; but he saw it afresh, and with fresh emotion, in the form of the knowledge offered to his colleague.

A thousand unuttered thoughts hummed for him in the air of these observations; not the least frequent of which was that Sarah might well of a truth not quite know whither she was drifting. She was in no position not to appear to expect that Chad should treat her handsomely; yet she struck our friend as privately stiffening a little each time she missed the chance of marking the great *nuance*. The great *nuance* was in brief that of course her brother must treat her handsomely—she should like to see him not; but that treating her handsomely, none the less, wasn't all in all —treating her handsomely buttered no parsnips; and that in fine there were moments when she felt the fixed eyes of their admirable absent mother fairly screw into the flat of her back. Strether, watching, after his habit, and overscoring with thought, positively had moments of his own in which he found himself sorry for her—occasions on which she affected him as a person seated in a runaway vehicle and turning over the question of a possible jump. *Would* she jump, could she, would *that* be a safe place?—this question, at such instants, sat for him in her lapse into pallor, her tight lips, her conscious eyes. It came back to the main point at issue; would she be, after all, to be squared? He believed on the whole she would jump; yet his alternations on this subject were the more especial stuff of his suspense. One thing remained well before him—a conviction that was in fact to gain sharpness from the impressions of this evening: that if she *should* gather in her skirts, close her eyes and quit the carriage while in motion, he would promptly enough become aware. She would alight

from her headlong course more or less directly upon him; it would be appointed to him, unquestionably, to receive her entire weight. Signs and portents of the experience thus in reserve for him had, as it happened, multiplied even through the dazzle of Chad's party. It was partly under the nervous consciousness of such a prospect that, leaving almost every one in the two other rooms, leaving those of the guests already known to him as well as a mass of brilliant strangers of both sexes and of several varieties of speech, he had desired five quiet minutes with little Bilham, whom he always found soothing and even a little inspiring, and to whom he had actually, moreover, something distinct and important to say.

He had felt of old—for it already seemed long ago—rather humiliated at discovering he could learn in talk with a personage so much his junior the lesson of a certain moral ease; but he had now got used to that—whether or no the mixture of the fact with other humiliations had made it indistinct, whether or no directly from little Bilham's example, the example of his being contentedly just the obscure and acute little Bilham he was. It worked so for him, Strether seemed to see; and our friend had at private hours a wan smile over the fact that he himself, after so many more years, was still in search of something that would work. However, as we have said, it worked just now for them equally to have found a corner a little apart. What particularly kept it apart was the circumstance that the music in the salon was admirable, with two or three such singers as it was a privilege to hear in private. Their presence gave a distinction to Chad's entertainment, and the interest of calculating their effect on Sarah was actually so sharp as to be almost painful. Unmistakably, in her single person, the motive of the composition and dressed in a splendour of crimson which affected Strether as the sound of a fall through a skylight, she would now be in the forefront of the listening circle and committed by it up to her eyes. Those eyes during the wonderful dinner itself he hadn't once met; having confessedly—perhaps a little

pusillanimously—arranged with Chad that he should be on the same side of the table. But there was no use in having arrived now with little Bilham at an unprecedented point of intimacy unless he could pitch everything into the pot. 'You who sat where you could see her, what does she make of it all? By which I mean on what terms does she take it?'

'Oh she takes it, I judge, as proving that the claim of his family is more than ever justified.'

'She isn't then pleased with what he has to show?'

'On the contrary; she's pleased with it as with his capacity to do this kind of thing—more than she has been pleased with anything for a long time. But she wants him to show it *there*. He has no right to waste it on the likes of us.'

Strether wondered. 'She wants him to move the whole thing over?'

'The whole thing—with an important exception. Everything he has "picked up"—and the way he knows how. She sees no difficulty in that. She'd run the whole show herself, and she'll make the handsome concession that Woollett would be on the whole in some ways the better for it. Not that it wouldn't be also in some ways the better for Woollett. The people there are just as good.'

'Just as good as you and these others? Ah that may be. But such an occasion as this, whether or no,' Strether said, 'isn't the people. It's what has made the people possible.'

'Well then,' his friend replied, 'there you are; I give you my impression for what it's worth. Mrs Pocock has *seen*, and that's to-night how she sits there. If you were to have a glimpse of her face you'd understand me. She has made up her mind—to the sound of expensive music.'

Strether took it freely in. 'Ah then I shall have news of her.'

'I don't want to frighten you, but I think that likely. However,' little Bilham continued, 'if I'm of the least use to you to hold on by——!'

'You're not of the least!'—and Strether laid an appreciative hand on him to say it. 'No one's of the least.' With which, to mark how gaily he could take it, he patted his

companion's knee. 'I must meet my fate alone, and I *shall*—oh you'll see! And yet,' he pursued the next moment, 'you *can* help me too. You once said to me'—he followed this further—'that you held Chad should marry. I didn't see then so well as I know now that you meant he should marry Miss Pocock. Do you still consider that he should? Because if you do'—he kept it up—'I want you immediately to change your mind. You can help me that way.'

'Help you by thinking he should *not* marry?'

'Not marry at all events Mamie.'

'And who then?'

'Ah,' Strether returned, 'that I'm not obliged to say. But Madame de Vionnet—I suggest—when he can.'

'Oh!' said little Bilham with some sharpness.

'Oh precisely! But he needn't marry at all—I'm at any rate not obliged to provide for it. Whereas in your case I rather feel that I *am*.'

Little Bilham was amused. 'Obliged to provide for my marrying?'

'Yes—after all I've done to you!'

The young man weighed it. 'Have you done as much as that?'

'Well,' said Strether, thus challenged, 'of course I must remember what you've also done to *me*. We may perhaps call it square. But all the same,' he went on, 'I wish awfully you'd marry Mamie Pocock yourself.'

Little Bilham laughed out. 'Why it was only the other night, in this very place, that you were proposing to me a different union altogether.'

'Mademoiselle de Vionnet?' Well, Strether easily confessed it. 'That, I admit, was a vain image. *This* is practical politics. I want to do something good for both of you—I wish you each so well; and you can see in a moment the trouble it will save me to polish you off by the same stroke. She likes you, you know. You console her. And she's splendid.'

Little Bilham stared as a delicate appetite stares at an overheaped plate 'What do I console her for?'

It just made his friend impatient. 'Oh, come, you know!'

'And what proves for you that she likes me?'

'Why the fact that I found her three days ago stopping at home alone all the golden afternoon on the mere chance that you'd come to her, and hanging over her balcony on that of seeing your cab drive up. I don't know what you want more.'

Little Bilham after a moment found it. 'Only just to know what proves to you that I like *her*.'

'Oh if what I've just mentioned isn't enough to make you do it, you're a stony-hearted little fiend. Besides'—Strether encouraged his fancy's flight—'you showed your inclination in the way you kept her waiting, kept her on purpose to see if she cared enough for you.'

His companion paid his ingenuity the deference of a pause. 'I didn't keep her waiting. I came at the hour. I wouldn't have kept her waiting for the world,' the young man honourably declared.

'Better still—then there you are!' And Strether, charmed, held him the faster. 'Even if you didn't do her justice, moreover,' he continued, 'I should insist on your immediately coming round to it. I want awfully to have worked it. I want'—and our friend spoke now with a yearning that was really earnest—'at least to have done *that*.'

'To have married me off—without a penny?'

'Well, I shan't live long; and I give you my word, now and here, that I'll leave you every penny of my own. I haven't many, unfortunately, but you shall have them all. And Miss Pocock, I think, has a few. I want,' Strether went on, 'to have been at least to that extent constructive—even expiatory. I've been sacrificing so to strange gods that I feel I want to put on record somehow, my fidelity—fundamentally unchanged after all—to our own. I feel as if my hands were embrued with the blood of monstrous alien altars—of another faith altogether. There it is—it's done.' And then he further explained. 'It took hold of me because the idea of getting her quite out of the way for Chad helps to clear my ground.'

The young man, at this, bounced about, and it brought them face to face in admitted amusement. 'You want me to marry as a convenience to Chad?'

'No,' Strether debated—'*he* doesn't care whether you marry or not. It's as a convenience simply to my own plan *for* him.'

'"Simply"!'—and little Bilham's concurrence was in itself a lively comment. 'Thank you. But I thought,' he continued, 'you had exactly *no* plan "for" him.'

'Well then call it my plan for myself—which may be well, as you say, to have none. His situation, don't you see? is reduced now to the bare facts one has to recognise. Mamie doesn't want him, and he doesn't want Mamie: so much as that these days have made clear. It's a thread we can wind up and tuck in.'

But dear little Bilham still questioned. '*You* can—since you seem so much to want to. But why should I?'

Poor Strether thought it over, but was obliged of course to admit that his demonstration did superficially fail. 'Seriously, there *is* no reason. It's my affair—I must do it alone. I've only my fantastic need of making my dose stiff.'

Little Bilham wondered. 'What do you call your dose.'

'Why what I have to swallow. I want my conditions unmitigated.'

He had spoken in the tone of talk for talk's sake, and yet with an obscure truth lurking in the loose folds; a circumstance presently not without its effect on his young friend. Little Bilham's eyes rested on him a moment with some intensity; then suddenly, as if everything had cleared up, he gave a happy laugh. It seemed to say that if pretending, or even trying, or still even hoping, to be able to care for Mamie would be of use, he was all there for the job. 'I'll do anything in the world for you!'

'Well,' Strether smiled, 'anything in the world is all I want. I don't know anything that pleased me in her more,' he went on, 'than the way that, on my finding her up there all alone, coming on her unawares and feeling greatly for her being so out of it, she knocked down my tall house of

cards with her instant and cheerful allusion to the next young man. It was somehow so the note I needed—her staying at home to receive him.'

'It was Chad of course,' said little Bilham, 'who asked the next young man—I like your name for me!—to call.'

'So I supposed—all of which, thank God, is in our innocent and natural manners. But do you know,' Strether asked, 'if Chad knows——?' And then as his interlocutor seemed at a loss: 'Why where she has come out.'

Little Bilham, at this, met his face with a conscious look; it was as if, more than anything yet, the allusion had penetrated. 'Do you know yourself?'

Strether lightly shook his head. 'There I stop. Oh, odd as it may appear to you, there *are* things I don't know. I only got the sense from her of something very sharp, and yet very deep down, that she was keeping all to herself. That is I had begun with the belief that she *had* kept it to herself; but face to face with her there I soon made out that there was a person with whom she would have shared it. I had thought she possibly might with *me*—but I saw then that I was only half in her confidence. When, turning to me to greet me—for she was on the balcony and I had come in without her knowing it—she showed me she had been expecting *you* and was proportionately disappointed, I got hold of the tail of my conviction. Half an hour later I was in possession of all the rest of it. You know what has happened.' He looked at his young friend hard—then he felt sure. 'For all you say, you're up to your eyes. So there you are.'

Little Bilham after an instant pulled half round. 'I assure you she hasn't told me anything.'

'Of course she hasn't. For what do you suggest that I suppose her to take you? But you've been with her every day, you've seen her freely, you've liked her greatly—I stick to that—and you've made your profit of it. You know what she has been through as well as you know that she has dined here to-night—which must have put her, by the way, through a good deal more.'

The young man faced this blast; after which he pulled round the rest of the way. 'I haven't in the least said she hasn't been nice to me. But she's proud.'

'And quite properly. But not too proud for that.'

'It's just her pride that has made her. Chad,' little Bilham loyally went on, 'has really been as kind to her as possible. It's awkward for a man when a girl's in love with him.'

'Ah but she isn't—now.'

Little Bilham sat staring before him; then he sprang up as if his friend's penetration, recurrent and insistent, made him really after all too nervous. 'No—she isn't now. It isn't in the least,' he went on, 'Chad's fault. He's really all right. I mean he would have been willing. But she came over with ideas. Those she had got at home. They had been her motive and support in joining her brother and his wife. She was to *save* our friend.'

'Ah like me, poor thing?' Strether also got to his feet.

'Exactly—she had a bad moment. It was very soon distinct to her, to pull her up, to let her down, that, alas, he was, he *is*, saved. There's nothing left for her to do.'

'Not even to love him?'

'She would have loved him better as she originally believed him.'

Strether wondered. 'Of course one asks one's self what notion a little girl forms, where a young man's in question, of such a history and such a state.'

'Well, this little girl saw them, no doubt, as obscure, but she saw them practically as wrong. The wrong for her *was* the obscure. Chad turns out at any rate right and good and disconcerting, while what she was all prepared for, primed and girded and wound up for, was to deal with him as the general opposite.'

'Yet wasn't her whole point'—Strether weighed it—'that he was able to be, that he *could* be, made better, redeemed?'

Little Bilham fixed it all a moment, and then with a small headshake that diffused a tenderness: 'She's too late. Too late for the miracle.'

'Yes'—his companion saw enough. 'Still, if the worst

fault of his condition is that it may be all there for her to profit by——?'

'Oh she doesn't want to "profit", in that flat way. She doesn't want to profit by another woman's work—she wants the miracle to have been her own miracle. *That's* what she's too late for.'

Strether quite felt how it all fitted, yet there seemed one loose piece. 'I'm bound to say, you know, that she strikes one, on these lines, as fastidious—what you call here *difficile*.'

Little Bilham tossed up his chin. 'Of course she's *difficile* —on any lines! What else in the world *are* our Mamies—the real, the right ones?'

'I see, I see,' our friend repeated, charmed by the responsive wisdom he had ended by so richly extracting. 'Mamie is one of the real and the right.'

'The very thing itself.'

'And what it comes to then,' Strether went on, 'is that poor awful Chad is simply too good for her.'

'Ah too good was what he was after all to be; but it was she herself, and she herself only, who was to have made him so.'

It hung beautifully together, but with still a loose end. 'Wouldn't he do for her even if he should after all break——'

'With his actual influence?' Oh little Bilham had for this inquiry the sharpest of all his controls. 'How can he "do" —on any terms whatever—when he's flagrantly spoiled?'

Strether could only meet the question with his passive, his receptive pleasure. 'Well, thank goodness, *you're* not! *You* remain for her to save, and I come back, on so beautiful and full a demonstration, to my contention of just now —that of your showing distinct signs of her having already begun.'

The most he could further say to himself—as his young friend turned away—was that the charge encountered for the moment no renewed denial. Little Bilham, taking his course back to the music, only shook his good-natured ears

an instant, in the manner of a terrier who has got wet; while Strether relapsed into the sense—which had for him in these days most of comfort—that he was free to believe in anything that from hour to hour kept him going. He had positively motions and flutters of this conscious hour-to-hour kind, temporary surrenders to irony, to fancy, frequent instinctive snatches at the growing rose of observation, constantly stronger for him, as he felt, in scent and colour, and in which he could bury his nose even to wantonness. This last resource was offered him, for that matter, in the very form of his next clear perception—the vision of a prompt meeting, in the doorway of the room, between little Bilham and brilliant Miss Barrace, who was entering as Bilham withdrew. She had apparently put him a question, to which he had replied by turning to indicate his late interlocutor; toward whom, after an interrogation further aided by a resort to the optical machinery that seemed, like her other ornaments, curious and archaic, the genial lady, suggesting more than ever for her fellow guest the old French print, the historic portrait, directed herself with an intention that Strether instantly met. He knew in advance the first note she would sound, and took in as she approached all her need of sounding it. Nothing yet had been so 'wonderful' between them as the present occasion; and it was her special sense of this quality in occasions that she was there, as she was in most places, to feed. That sense had already been so well fed by the situation about them that she had quitted the other room, forsaken the music, dropped out of the play, abandoned, in a word, the stage itself, that she might stand a minute behind the scenes with Strether and so perhaps figure as one of the famous augurs replying, behind the oracle, to the wink of the other. Seated near him presently where little Bilham had sat she replied in truth to many things; beginning as soon as he had said to her—what he hoped he said without fatuity—'All you ladies are extraordinarily kind to me.'

She played her long handle, which shifted her observation: she saw in an instant all the absences that left them

free. 'How can we be anything else? But isn't that exactly your plight? "We ladies"—oh we're nice, and you must be having enough of us! As one of us, you know, I don't pretend I'm crazy about us! But Miss Gostrey at least tonight has left you alone, hasn't she?' With which she again looked about as if Maria might still lurk.

'Oh yes,' said Strether; 'she's only sitting up for me at home.' And then as this elicited from his companion her gay 'Oh, oh, oh!' he explained that he meant sitting up in suspense and prayer. 'We thought it on the whole better she shouldn't be present; and either way of course it's a terrible worry for her.' He abounded in the sense of his appeal to the ladies, and they might take their choice of his doing so from humility or from pride. 'Yet she inclines to believe I shall come out.'

'Oh I incline to believe too you'll come out!'—Miss Barrace, with her laugh, was not to be behind. 'Only the question's about *where*, isn't it? However,' she happily continued, 'if it's anywhere at all it must be very far on, mustn't it? To do us justice, I think, you know,' she laughed, 'we do, among us all, want you rather far on. Yes, yes,' she repeated in her quick droll way; 'we want you very, *very* far on!' After which she wished to know why he had thought it better Maria shouldn't be present.

'Oh,' he replied, 'it was really her own idea. I should have wished it. But she dreads responsibility.'

'And isn't that a new thing for her?'

'To dread it? No doubt—no doubt. But her nerve has given way.'

Miss Barrace looked at him a moment. 'She has too much at stake.' Then less gravely: 'Mine, luckily for me, holds out.'

'Luckily for me too'—Strether came back to that. 'My own isn't so firm, *my* appetite for responsibility isn't so sharp, as that I haven't felt the very principle of this occasion to be "the more the merrier". If we *are* so merry it's because Chad has understood so well.'

'He has understood amazingly,' said Miss Barrace.

'It's wonderful!'—Strether anticipated for her.

'It's wonderful!' she, to meet it, intensified; so that, face to face over it, they largely and recklessly laughed. But she presently added: 'Oh I see the principle. If one didn't one would be lost. But when once one has got hold of it——'

'It's as simple as twice two! From the moment he had to do something——'

'A crowd'—she took him straight up—'was the only thing? Rather, rather: a rumpus of sound,' she laughed, 'or nothing. Mrs Pocock's built in, or built out—whichever you call it; she's packed so tight she can't move. She's in splendid isolation'—Miss Barrace embroidered the theme.

Strether followed, but scrupulous of justice. 'Yet with every one in the place successively introduced to her.'

'Wonderfully—but just so that it does build her out. She's bricked up, she's buried alive!'

Strether seemed for a moment to look at it; but it brought him to a sigh. 'Oh but she's not dead! It will take more than this to kill her.'

His companion had a pause that might have been for pity. 'No, I can't pretend I think she's finished—or that it's for more than to-night.' She remained pensive as if with the same compunction. 'It's only up to her chin.' Then again for the fun of it: 'She can breathe.'

'She can breathe!'—he echoed it in the same spirit. 'And do you know,' he went on, 'what's really all this time happening to me?—through the beauty of music, the gaiety of voices, the uproar in short of our revel and the felicity of your wit? The sound of Mrs Pocock's respiration drowns for me, I assure you, every other. It's literally all I hear.'

She focused him with her clink of chains. 'Well——!' she breathed ever so kindly.

'Well, what?'

'She *is* free from her chin up,' she mused; 'and that *will* be enough for her.'

'It will be enough for me!' Strether ruefully laughed. 'Waymarsh has really,' he then asked, 'brought her to see you?'

'Yes—but that's the worst of it. I could do you no good. And yet I tried hard.'

Strether wondered. 'And how did you try?'

'Why I didn't speak of you.'

'I see. That was better.'

'Then what would have been worse? For speaking or silent,' she lightly wailed, 'I somehow "compromise". And it has never been any one but you.'

'That shows'—he was magnanimous—'that's it's something not in you, but in one's self. It's *my* fault.'

She was silent a little. 'No, it's Mr Waymarsh's. It's the fault of his having brought her.'

'Ah then,' said Strether good-naturedly, 'why *did* he bring her?'

'He couldn't afford not to.'

'Oh you were a trophy—one of the spoils of conquest? But why in that case since you do "compromise"——'

'Don't I compromise *him* as well? I do compromise him as well,' Miss Barrace smiled. 'I compromise him as hard as I can. But for Mr Waymarsh it isn't fatal. It's—so far as his wonderful relation with Mrs Pocock is concerned—favourable.' And then, as he still seemed slightly at sea: 'The man who had succeeded with *me*, don't you see? For her to get him from me was such an added incentive.'

Strether saw, but as if his path was still strewn with surprises. 'It's "from" you then that she has got him?'

She was amused at his momentary muddle. 'You can fancy my fight! She believes in her triumph. I think it has been part of her joy.'

'Oh her joy!' Strether sceptically murmured.

'Well, she thinks she has had her own way. And what's to-night for her but a kind of apotheosis? Her frock's really good.'

'Good enough to go to heaven in? For after a real apotheosis,' Strether went on, 'there's nothing *but* heaven. For Sarah there's only to-morrow.'

'And you mean that she won't find to-morrow heavenly?'

'Well, I mean that I somehow feel to-night—on her

behalf—too good to be true. She has had her cake; that is she's in the act now of having it, of swallowing the largest and sweetest piece. There won't be another left for her. Certainly *I* haven't one. It can only, at the best, be Chad.' He continued to make it out as for their common entertainment. 'He may have one, as it were, up his sleeve; yet it's borne in upon me that if he had——'

'He wouldn't'—she quite understood—'have taken all *this* trouble? I dare say not, and, if I may be quite free and dreadful, I very much hope he won't take any more. Of course I won't pretend now,' she added, 'not to know what it's a question of.'

'Oh every one must know now,' poor Strether thoughtfully admitted; 'and it's strange enough and funny enough that one should feel everybody here at this very moment to be knowing and watching and waiting.'

'Yes—isn't it indeed funny?' Miss Barrace quite rose to it. 'That's the way we *are* in Paris.' She was always pleased with a new contribution to that queerness. 'It's wonderful! But, you know,' she declared, 'it all depends on you. I don't want to turn the knife in your vitals, but that's naturally what you just now meant by our being on top of you. We know you as the hero of the drama, and we're gathered to see what you'll do.'

Strether looked at her a moment with a light perhaps slightly obscured. 'I think that must be why the hero has taken refuge in this corner. He's scared at his heroism—he shrinks from his part.'

'Ah but we nevertheless believe he'll play it. That's why,' Miss Barrace kindly went on, 'we take such an interest in you. We feel that you'll come up to the scratch.' And then as he seemed perhaps not quite to take fire: 'Don't let him do it.'

'Don't let Chad go?'

'Yes, keep hold of him. With all this'—and she indicated the general tribute—'he has done enough. We love him here—he's charming.'

'It's beautiful,' said Strether, 'the way you all can simplify when you will.'

But she gave it to him back. 'It's nothing to the way *you* will when you must.'

He winced at it as at the very voice of prophecy, and it kept him a moment quiet. He detained her, however, on her appearing about to leave him alone in the rather cold clearance their talk had made. 'There positively isn't a sign of a hero to-night; the hero's dodging and shirking, the hero's ashamed. Therefore, you know, I think, what you must all *really* be occupied with is the heroine.'

Miss Barrace took a minute. 'The heroine?'

'The heroine. I've treated her,' said Strether, 'not a bit like a hero. Oh,' he sighed, 'I don't do it well!'

She eased him off. 'You do it as you can.' And then after another hesitation: 'I think she's satisfied.'

But he remained compunctious. 'I haven't been near her. I haven't looked at her.'

'Ah then you've lost a good deal!'

He showed that he knew it. 'She's more wonderful than ever?'

'Than ever. With Mr Pocock.'

Strether wondered. 'Madame de Vionnet—with Jim?'

'Madame de Vionnet—with "Jim".' Miss Barrace was historic.

'And what's she doing with him?'

'Ah you must ask *him!*'

Strether's face lighted again at the prospect. 'It *will* be amusing to do so.' Yet he continued to wonder. 'But she must have some idea.'

'Of course she has—she has twenty ideas. She has in the first place,' said Miss Barrace, swinging a little her tortoise-shell, 'that of doing her part. Her part is to help *you.*'

It came out as nothing had come yet; links were missing and connexions unnamed, but it was suddenly as if they were at the heart of their subject. 'Yes; how much more she does it,' Strether gravely reflected, 'than I help *her!*' It all came over him as with the near presence of the beauty,

the grace, the intense, dissimulated spirit with which he had, as he said, been putting off contact. '*She* has courage.'

'Ah she has courage!' Miss Barrace quite agreed; and it was as if for a moment they saw the quantity in each other's face.

But indeed the whole thing was present. 'How much she must care!'

'Ah there it is. She does care. But it isn't, is it,' Miss Barrace considerately added, 'as if you had ever had any doubt of that?'

Strether seemed suddenly to like to feel that he really never had. 'Why of course it's the whole point.'

'*Voilà!*' Miss Barrace smiled.

'It's why one came out,' Strether went on. 'And it's why one has stayed so long. And it's also'—he abounded—'why one's going home. It's why, it's why——'

'It's why everything!' she concurred. 'It's why she might be to-night—for all she looks and shows, and for all your friend "Jim" does—about twenty years old. That's another of her ideas; to be for him, and to be quite easily and charmingly, as young as a little girl.'

Strether assisted at his distance. '"For him"? For Chad——?'

'For Chad, in a manner, naturally, always. But in particular to-night for Mr Pocock.' And then as her friend still stared: 'Yes, it *is* of a bravery! But that's what she has: her high sense of duty.' It was more than sufficiently before them. 'When Mr Newsome has his hands so embarrassed with his sister——'

'It's quite the least'—Strether filled it out—'that she should take his sister's husband? Certainly—quite the least. So she has taken him.'

'She has taken him.' It was all Miss Barrace had meant.

Still it remained enough. 'It must be funny.'

'Oh it *is* funny.' That of course essentially went with it.

But it brought them back. 'How indeed then she must care!' In answer to which Strether's entertainer dropped a comprehensive 'Ah!' expressive perhaps of some impatience

for the time he took to get used to it. She herself had got used to it long before.

II

WHEN ONE morning within the week he perceived the whole thing to be really at last upon him Strether's immediate feeling was all relief. He had known this morning that something was about to happen—known it, in a moment, by Waymarsh's manner when Waymarsh appeared before him during his brief consumption of coffee and a roll in the small slippery *salle-à-manger* so associated now with rich rumination. Strether had taken there of late various lonely and absent-minded meals; he communed there, even at the end of June, with a suspected chill, the air of old shivers mixed with old savours, the air in which so many of his impressions had perversely matured; the place meanwhile renewing its message to him by the very circumstance of his single state. He now sat there, for the most part, to sigh, softly, while he vaguely tilted his carafe, over the vision of how much better Waymarsh was occupied. That was really his success by the common measure—to have led his companion so on and on. He remembered how at first there had been scarce a squatting-place he could beguile him into passing; the actual outcome of which at last was that there was scarce one that could arrest him in his rush. His rush—as Strether vividly and amusedly figured it—continued to be all with Sarah, and contained perhaps moreover the word of the whole enigma, whipping up in its fine full-flavoured froth the very principle, for good or for ill, of his own, of Strether's destiny. It might after all, to the end, only be that they had united to save him, and indeed, so far as Waymarsh was concerned, that *had* to be the spring of action. Strether was glad at all events, in connexion with the case, that the saving he required was not

more scant; so constituted a luxury was it in certain lights just to lurk there out of the full glare. He had moments of quite seriously wondering whether Waymarsh wouldn't in fact, thanks to old friendship and a conceivable indulgence, make about as good terms for him as he might make for himself. They wouldn't be the same terms of course; but they might have the advantage that he himself probably should be able to make none at all.

He was never in the morning very late, but Waymarsh had already been out, and, after a peep into the dim refectory, he presented himself there with much less than usual of his large looseness. He had made sure, through the expanse of glass exposed to the court, that they would be alone; and there was now in fact that about him that pretty well took up the room. He was dressed in the garments of summer; and save that his white waistcoat was redundant and bulging these things favoured, they determined, his expression. He wore a straw hat such as his friend hadn't yet seen in Paris, and he showed a buttonhole freshly adorned with a magnificent rose. Strether read on the instant his story—how, astir for the previous hour, the sprinkled newness of the day, so pleasant at that season in Paris, he was fairly panting with the pulse of adventure and had been with Mrs Pocock, unmistakably, to the Marché aux Fleurs. Strether really knew in this vision of him a joy that was akin to envy; so reversed as he stood there did their old positions seem; so comparatively doleful now showed, by the sharp turn of the wheel, the posture of the pilgrim from Woollett. He wondered, this pilgrim, if he had originally looked to Waymarsh so brave and well, so remarkably launched, as it was at present the latter's privilege to appear. He recalled that his friend had remarked to him even at Chester that his aspect belied his plea of prostration; but there certainly couldn't have been, for an issue, an aspect less concerned than Waymarsh's with the menace of decay. Strether had at any rate never resembled a Southern planter of the great days—which was the image picturesquely suggested by the happy relation between the

fuliginous face and the wide panama of his visitor. This type, it further amused him to guess, had been, on Waymarsh's part, the object of Sarah's care; he was convinced that her taste had not been a stranger to the conception and purchase of the hat, any more than her fine fingers had been guiltless of the bestowal of the rose. It came to him in the current of thought, as things so oddly did come, that *he* had never risen with the lark to attend a brilliant woman to the Marché aux Fleurs; this could be fastened on him in connexion neither with Miss Gostrey nor with Madame de Vionnet; the practice of getting up early for adventures could indeed in no manner be fastened on him. It came to him in fact that just here was his usual case: he was for ever missing things through his general genius for missing them, while others were for ever picking them up through a contrary bent. And it was others who looked abstemious and he who looked greedy; it was he somehow who finally paid, and it was others who mainly partook. Yes, he should go to the scaffold yet for he wouldn't know quite whom. He almost, for that matter, felt on the scaffold now and really quite enjoying it. It worked out as *because* he was anxious there—it worked out as for this reason that Waymarsh was so blooming. It was *his* trip for health, for a change, that proved the success—which was just what Strether, planning and exerting himself, had desired it should be. That truth already sat full-blown on his companion's lips; benevolence breathed from them as with the warmth of active exercise, and also a little as with the bustle of haste.

'Mrs Pocock, whom I left a quarter of an hour ago at her hotel, has asked me to mention to you that she would like to find you at home here in about another hour. She wants to see you; she has something to say—or considers, I believe, that you may have: so that I asked her myself why she shouldn't come right round. She hasn't *been* round yet—to see our place; and I took upon myself to say that I was sure you'd be glad to have her. The thing's therefore, you see, to keep right here till she comes.'

The announcement was sociably, even though, after Waymarsh's wont, somewhat solemnly made; but Strether quickly felt other things in it than these light features. It was the first approach, from that quarter, to admitted consciousness; it quickened his pulse; it simply meant at last that he should have but himself to thank if he didn't know where he was. He had finished his breakfast; he pushed it away and was on his feet. There were plenty of elements of surprise, but only one of doubt. 'The thing's for *you* to keep here too?' Waymarsh had been slightly ambiguous.

He wasn't ambiguous, however, after this inquiry; and Strether's understanding had probably never before opened so wide and effective a mouth as it was to open during the next five minutes. It was no part of his friend's wish, as appeared, to help to receive Mrs Pocock; he quite understood the spirit in which she was to present herself, but his connexion with her visit was limited to his having—well, as he might say—perhaps a little promoted it. He had thought, and had let her know it, that Strether possibly would think she might have been round before. At any rate, as turned out, she had been wanting herself, quite a while, to come. 'I told her,' said Waymarsh, 'that it would have been a bright idea if she had only carried it out before.'

Strether pronounced it so bright as to be almost dazzling. 'But why *hasn't* she carried it out before? She has seen me every day—she had only to name her hour. I've been waiting and waiting.'

'Well, I told her you had. And she has been waiting too.' It was, in the oddest way in the world, on the showing of this tone, a genial new pressing coaxing Waymarsh; a Waymarsh conscious with a different consciousness from any he had yet betrayed, and actually rendered by it almost insinuating. He lacked only time for full persuasion, and Strether was to see in a moment why. Meantime, however, our friend perceived, he was announcing a step of some magnanimity on Mrs Pocock's part, so that he could deprecate a sharp question. It was his own high purpose in fact to have smoothed sharp questions to rest. He looked his old

comrade very straight in the eyes, and he had never conveyed to him in so mute a manner so much kind confidence and so much good advice. Everything that was between them was again in his face, but matured and shelved and finally disposed of. 'At any rate,' he added, 'she's coming now.'

Considering how many pieces had to fit themselves, it all fell, in Strether's brain, into a close rapid order. He saw on the spot what had happened, and what probably would yet; and it was all funny enough. It was perhaps just this freedom of appreciation that wound him up to his flare of high spirits. 'What is she coming *for*?—to kill me?'

'She's coming to be very *very* kind to you, and you must let me say that I greatly hope you'll not be less so to herself.'

This was spoken by Waymarsh with much gravity of admonition, and as Strether stood there he knew he had but to make a movement to take the attitude of a man gracefully receiving a present. The present was that of the opportunity dear old Waymarsh had flattered himself he had divined in him the slight soreness of not having yet thoroughly enjoyed; so he had brought it to him thus, as on a little silver breakfast-tray, familiarly though delicately —without oppressive pomp; and he was to bend and smile and acknowledge, was to take and use and be grateful. He was not—that was the beauty of it—to be asked to deflect too much from his dignity. No wonder the old boy bloomed in this bland air of his own distillation. Strether felt for a moment as if Sarah were actually walking up and down outside. Wasn't she hanging about the porte-cochère while her friend thus summarily opened a way? Strether would meet her but to take it, and everything would be for the best in the best of possible worlds. He had never so much known what any one meant as, in the light of this demonstration, he knew what Mrs Newsome did. It had reached Waymarsh from Sarah, but it had reached Sarah from her mother, and there was no break in the chain by which it reached *him*. 'Has anything particular happened,' he asked

after a minute—'so suddenly to determine her? Has she heard anything unexpected from home?'

Waymarsh, on this, it seemed to him, looked at him harder than ever. '"Unexpected"?' He had a brief hesitation; then, however, he was firm. 'We're leaving Paris.'

'Leaving? That *is* sudden.'

Waymarsh showed a different opinion. 'Less so than it may seem. The purpose of Mrs Pocock's visit is to explain to you in fact that it's *not*.'

Strether didn't at all know if he had really an advantage —anything that would practically count as one; but he enjoyed for the moment—as for the first time in his life—the sense of so carrying it off. He wondered—it was amusing—if he felt as the impudent feel. 'I shall take great pleasure, I assure you, in any explanation. I shall be delighted to receive Sarah.'

The sombre glow just darkened in his comrade's eyes; but he was struck with the way it died out again. It was too mixed with another consciousness—it was too smothered, as might be said, in flowers. He really for the time regretted it—poor dear old sombre glow! Something straight and simple, something heavy and empty, had been eclipsed in its company; something by which he had best known his friend. Waymarsh wouldn't *be* his friend, somehow, without the occasional ornament of the sacred rage, and the right to the sacred rage—inestimably precious for Strether's charity—he also seemed in a manner, and at Mrs Pocock's elbow, to have forfeited. Strether remembered the occasion early in their stay when on that very spot he had come out with his earnest, his ominous 'Quit it!'—and, so remembering, felt it hang by a hair that he didn't himself now utter the same note. Waymarsh was having a good time —this was the truth that was embarrassing for him, and he was having it then and there, he was having it in Europe, he was having it under the very protection of circumstances of which he didn't in the least approve; all of which placed him in a false position, with no issue possible—none at least by the grand manner. It was practically in the manner of

any one—it was all but in poor Strether's own—that instead of taking anything up he merely made the most of having to be himself explanatory. 'I'm not leaving for the United States direct. Mr and Mrs Pocock and Miss Mamie are thinking of a little trip before their own return, and we've been talking for some days past of our joining forces. We've settled it that we do join and that we sail together the end of next month. But we start tomorrow for Switzerland. Mrs Pocock wants some scenery. She hasn't had much yet.'

He was brave in his way too, keeping nothing back, confessing all there was, and only leaving Strether to make certain connexions. 'Is what Mrs Newsome had cabled her daughter an injunction to break off short?'

The grand manner indeed at this just raised its head a little. 'I know nothing about Mrs Newsome's cables.'

Their eyes met on it with some intensity—during the few seconds of which something happened quite out of proportion to the time. It happened that Strether, looking thus at his friend, didn't take his answer for truth—and that something more again occurred in consequence of *that*. Yes —Waymarsh just *did* know about Mrs Newsome's cables: to what other end than that had they dined together at Bignon's? Strether almost felt for the instant that it was to Mrs Newsome herself the dinner had been given; and, for that matter, quite felt how she must have known about it and, as he might think, protected and consecrated it. He had a quick blurred view of daily cables, questions, answers, signals: clear enough was his vision of the expense that, when so wound up, the lady at home was prepared to incur. Vivid not less was his memory of what, during his long observation of her, some of her attainments of that high pitch had cost her. Distinctly she was at the highest now, and Waymarsh, who imagined himself an independent performer, was really, forcing his fine old natural voice, an overstrained accompanist. The whole reference of his errand seemed to mark her for Strether as by this time consentingly familiar to him, and nothing yet had so despoiled her of a

special shade of consideration. 'You don't know,' he asked, 'whether Sarah has been directed from home to try me on the matter of my also going to Switzerland?'

'I know,' said Waymarsh as manfully as possible, 'nothing whatever about her private affairs; though I believe her to be acting in conformity with things that have my highest respect.' It was as manful as possible, but it was still the false note—as it had to be to convey so sorry a statement. He knew everything, Strether more and more felt, that he thus disclaimed, and his little punishment was just in this doom to a second fib. What falser position—given the man—could the most vindictive mind impose? He ended by squeezing through a passage in which three months before he would certainly have stuck fast. 'Mrs Pocock will probably be ready herself to answer any inquiry you may put to her. But,' he continued, '*but*——*!*' He faltered on it.

'But what? Don't put her too many?'

Waymarsh looked large, but the harm was done; he couldn't, do what he would, help looking rosy. 'Don't do anything you'll be sorry for.'

It was an attenuation, Strether guessed, of something else that had been on his lips; it was a sudden drop to directness, and was thereby the voice of sincerity. He had fallen to the supplicating note, and that immediately, for our friend, made a difference and reinstated him. They were in communication as they had been, that first morning, in Sarah's salon and in her presence and Madame de Vionnet's; and the same recognition of a great goodwill was again, after all, possible. Only the amount of response Waymarsh had then taken for granted was doubled, decupled now. This came out when he presently said: 'Of course I needn't assure you *I* hope you'll come with us.' Then it was that his implications and expectations loomed up for Strether as almost pathetically gross.

The latter patted his shoulder while he thanked him, giving the go-by to the question of joining the Pococks; he expressed the joy he felt at seeing him go forth again so brave and free, and he in fact almost took leave of him on

the spot. 'I shall see you again of course before you go; but I'm meanwhile much obliged to you for arranging so conveniently for what you've told me. I shall walk up and down in the court—dear little old court which we've each bepaced so, this last couple of months, to the tune of our flights and our drops, our hesitations and our plunges: I shall hang about there, all impatience and excitement, please let Sarah know, till she graciously presents herself. Leave me with her without fear,' he laughed; 'I assure you I shan't hurt her. I don't think either she'll hurt *me*: I'm in a situation in which damage was some time ago discounted. Besides, *that* isn't what worries you—but don't, don't explain! We're all right as we are: which was the degree of success our adventure was pledged to for each of us. We weren't, it seemed, all right as we were before; and we've got over the ground, all things considered, quickly. I hope you'll have a lovely time in the Alps.'

Waymarsh fairly looked up at him as from the foot of them. 'I don't know as I *ought* really to go.'

It was the conscience of Milrose in the very voice of Milrose, but, oh it was feeble and flat! Strether suddenly felt quite ashamed for him; he breathed a greater boldness. '*Let* yourself, on the contrary, go—in all agreeable directions. These are precious hours—at our age they mayn't recur. Don't have it to say to yourself at Milrose, next winter, that you hadn't courage for them.' And then as his comrade queerly stared: 'Live up to Mrs Pocock.'

'Live up to her?'

'You're a great help to her.'

Waymarsh looked at it as at one of the uncomfortable things that were certainly true and that it was yet ironical to say. 'It's more then than you are.'

'That's exactly your own chance and advantage. Besides,' said Strether, 'I do in my way contribute. I know what I'm about.'

Waymarsh had kept on his great panama, and, as he now stood nearer the door, his last look beneath the shade of it

had turned again to darkness and warning. 'So do I! See here, Strether.'

'I know what you're going to say. Quit this!'

'Quit this!' But it lacked its old intensity; nothing of it remained; it went out of the room with him.

III

ALMOST THE first thing, strangely enough, that, about an hour later, Strether found himself doing in Sarah's presence was to remark articulately on this failure, in their friend, of what had been superficially his great distinction. It was as if—he alluded of course to the grand manner—the dear man had sacrificed it to some other advantage; which would be of course only for himself to measure. It might be simply that he was physically so much more sound than on his first coming out; this was all prosaic, comparatively cheerful and vulgar. And fortunately, if one came to that, his improvement in health was really itself grander than any manner it could be conceived as having cost him. 'You yourself alone, dear Sarah'—Strether took the plunge—'have done him, it strikes me, in these three weeks, as much good as all the rest of his time together.'

It was a plunge because somehow the range of reference was, in the conditions, 'funny', and made funnier still by Sarah's attitude, by the turn the occasion had, with her appearance, so sensibly taken. Her appearance was really indeed funnier than anything else—the spirit in which he felt her to be there as soon as she *was* there, the shade of obscurity that cleared up for him as soon as he was seated with her in the small *salon de lecture* that had, for the most part, in all the weeks, witnessed the wane of his early vivacity of discussion with Waymarsh. It was an immense thing, quite a tremendous thing, for her to have come: this truth opened out to him in spite of his having already

arrived for himself at a fairly vivid view of it. He had done exactly what he had given Waymarsh his word for—had walked and re-walked the court while he awaited her advent; acquiring in this exercise an amount of light that affected him at the time as flooding the scene. She had decided upon the step in order to give him the benefit of a doubt, in order to be able to say to her mother that she had, even to abjectness, smoothed the way for him. The doubt had been as to whether he mightn't take her as not having smoothed it—and the admonition had possibly come from Waymarsh's more detached spirit. Waymarsh had at any rate, certainly, thrown his weight into the scale—he had pointed to the importance of depriving their friend of a grievance. She had done justice to the plea, and it was to set herself right with a high ideal that she actually sat there in her state. Her calculation was sharp in the immobility with which she held her tall parasol-stick upright and at arm's length, quite as if she had struck the place to plant her flag; in the separate precautions she took not to show as nervous; in the aggressive repose in which she did quite nothing but wait for him. Doubt ceased to be possible from the moment he had taken in that she had arrived with no proposal whatever; that her concern was simply to show what she had come to receive. She had come to receive his submission, and Waymarsh was to have made it plain to him that she would expect nothing less. He saw fifty things, her host, at this convenient stage; but one of those he most saw was that their anxious friend hadn't quite had the hand required of him. Waymarsh *had*, however, uttered the request that she might find him mild, and while hanging about the court before her arrival he had turned over with zeal the different ways in which he could be so. The difficulty was that if he was mild he wasn't, for her purpose, conscious. If she wished him conscious—as everything about her cried aloud that she did—she must accordingly be at costs to make him so. Conscious he *was*, for himself—but only of too many things; so she must choose the one she required.

Practically, however, it at last got itself named, and when once that had happened they were quite at the centre of their situation. One thing had really done as well as another; when Strether had spoken of Waymarsh's leaving him, and that had necessarily brought on a reference to Mrs Pocock's similar intention, the jump was but short to supreme lucidity. Light became indeed after that so intense that Strether would doubtless have but half made out, in the prodigious glare, by which of the two the issue had been in fact precipitated. It was, in their contracted quarters, as much there between them as if it had been something suddenly spilled with a crash and a splash on the floor. The form of his submission was to be an engagement to acquit himself within the twenty-four hours. 'He'll go in a moment if you give him the word—he assures me on his honour he'll do that': this came in its order, out of its order, in respect to Chad, after the crash had occurred. It came repeatedly during the time taken by Strether to feel that he was even more fixed in his rigour than he had supposed—the time he was not above adding to a little by telling her that such a way of putting it on her brother's part left him sufficiently surprised. She wasn't at all funny at last—she was really fine; and he felt easily where she was strong—strong for herself. It hadn't yet so come home to him that she was nobly and appointedly officious. She was acting in interests grander and clearer than that of her poor little personal, poor little Parisian equilibrium, and all his consciousness of her mother's moral pressure profited by this proof of its sustaining force. She would be held up; she would be strengthened; he needn't in the least be anxious for her. What would once more have been distinct to him had he tried to make it so was that, as Mrs Newsome was essentially all moral pressure, the presence of this element was almost identical with her own presence. It wasn't perhaps that he felt he was dealing with her straight, but it was certainly as if she had been straight with *him*. She was reaching him somehow by the lengthened arm of the spirit, and he was having to that extent to take her into

account; but he wasn't reaching her in turn, not making her take *him*; he was only reaching Sarah, who appeared to take so little of him. 'Something has clearly passed between you and Chad,' he presently said, 'that I think I ought to know something more about. Does he put it all,' he smiled, 'on me?'

'Did you come out,' she asked, 'to put it all on *him*?'

But he replied to this no further than, after an instant, by saying, 'Oh it's all right. Chad I mean's all right in having said to you—well anything he may have said. I'll *take* it all —what he does put on me. Only I must see him before I see you again.'

She hesitated, but she brought it out. 'Is it absolutely necessary you should see me again?'

'Certainly, if I'm to give you any definite word about anything.'

'Is it your idea then,' she returned, 'that I shall keep on meeting you only to be exposed to fresh humiliation?'

He fixed her a longer time. 'Are your instructions from Mrs Newsome that you shall, even at the worst, absolutely and irretrievably break with me?'

'My instructions from Mrs Newsome are, if you please, my affair. You know perfectly what your own were, and you can judge for yourself of what it can do for you to have made what you have of them. You can perfectly see, at any rate, I'll go so far as to say, that if I wish not to expose myself I must wish still less to expose *her*.' She had already said more than she had quite expected; but, though she had also pulled up, the colour in her face showed him he should from one moment to the other have it all. He now indeed felt the high importance of his having it. 'What is your conduct but an outrage to women like *us*? I mean your acting as if there can be a doubt—as between us and such another—of his duty?'

He thought a moment. It was rather much to deal with at once; not only the question itself, but the sore abysses it revealed. 'Of course they're totally different kinds of duty.'

'And do you pretend that he has any at all—to such another?'

'Do you mean to Madame de Vionnet?' He uttered the name not to affront her, but yet again to gain time—time that he needed for taking in something still other and larger than her demand of a moment before. It wasn't at once that he could see all that was in her actual challenge; but when he did he found himself just checking a low vague sound, a sound which was perhaps the nearest approach his vocal chords had ever known to a growl. Everything Mrs Pocock had failed to give a sign of recognising in Chad as a particular part of a transformation—everything that had lent intention to this particular failure—affected him as gathered into a large loose bundle and thrown, in her words, into his face. The missile made him to that extent catch his breath; which however he presently recovered. 'Why when a woman's at once so charming and so beneficent——'

'You can sacrifice mothers and sisters to her without a blush, and can make them cross the ocean on purpose to feel the more, and take from you the straighter, *how* you do it?'

Yes, she had taken him up as short and as sharply as that; but he tried not to flounder in her grasp. 'I don't think there's anything I've done in any such calculated way as you describe. Everything has come as a sort of indistinguish able part of everything else. Your coming out belonged closely to my having come before you, and my having come was a result of our general state of mind. Our general state of mind had proceeded, on its side, from our queer ignorance, our queer misconceptions and confusions—from which, since then, an inexorable tide of light seems to have floated us into our perhaps still queerer knowledge. Don't you *like* your brother as he is,' he went on, 'and haven't you given your mother an intelligible account of all that that comes to?'

It put to her also, doubtless, his own tone, too many things; this at least would have been the case hadn't his final challenge directly helped her. Everything, at the stage they

had reached, directly helped her, because everything betrayed in him such a basis of intention. He saw—the odd way things came out!—that he would have been held less monstrous had he only been a little wilder. What exposed him was just his poor old trick of quiet inwardness, what exposed him was his *thinking* such offence. He hadn't in the least however the desire to irritate that Sarah imputed to him, and he could only at last temporise, for the moment, with her indignant view. She was altogether more inflamed than he had expected, and he would probably understand this better when he should learn what had occurred for her with Chad. Till then her view of his particular blackness, her clear surprise at his not clutching the pole she held out, must pass as extravagant. 'I leave you to flatter yourself,' she returned, 'that what you speak of is what *you've* beautifully done. When a thing has been already described in such a lovely way——!' But she caught herself up, and her comment on his description rang out sufficiently loud. 'Do you consider her even an apology for a decent woman?'

Ah there it was at last! She put the matter more crudely than, for his own mixed purposes, he had yet had to do; but essentially it was all one matter. It was so much—so much; and she treated it, poor lady, as so little. He grew conscious, as he was now apt to do, of a strange smile, and the next moment he found himself talking like Miss Barrace. 'She has struck me from the first as wonderful. I've been thinking too moreover that, after all, she would probably have represented even for yourself something rather new and rather good.'

He was to have given Mrs Pocock with this, however, but her best opportunity for a sound of derision. 'Rather new? I hope so with all my heart!'

'I mean,' he explained, 'that she might have affected you by her exquisite amiability—a real revelation, it has seemed to myself; her high rarity, her distinction of every sort.'

He had been, with these words, consciously a little 'precious'; but he had had to be—he couldn't give her the truth of the case without them; and it seemed to him more

over now that he didn't care. He had at all events not served his cause, for she sprang at its exposed side. 'A "revelation" —to *me:* I've come to such a woman for a revelation? You talk to me about "distinction"—*you*, you who've had your privilege?—when the most distinguished woman we shall either of us have seen in this world sits there insulted, in her loneliness, by your incredible comparison!'

Strether forbore, with an effort, from straying; but he looked all about him. 'Does your mother herself make the point that she sits insulted?'

Sarah's answer came so straight, so 'pat', as might have been said, that he felt on the instant its origin. 'She has confided to my judgment and my tenderness the expression of her personal sense of everything, and the assertion of her personal dignity.'

They were the very words of the lady of Woollett—he would have known them in a thousand; her parting charge to her child. Mrs Pocock accordingly spoke to this extent by book, and the fact immensely moved him. 'If she does really feel as you say it's of course very very dreadful. I've given sufficient proof, one would have thought,' he added, 'of my deep admiration for Mrs Newsome.'

'And pray what proof would one have thought you'd *call* sufficient? That of thinking this person here so far superior to her?'

He wondered again; he waited. 'Ah dear Sarah, you must *leave* me this person here!'

In his desire to avoid all vulgar retorts, to show how, even perversely, he clung to his rag of reason, he had softly almost wailed this plea. Yet he knew it to be perhaps the most positive declaration he had ever made in his life, and his visitor's reception of it virtually gave it that importance. 'That's exactly what I'm delighted to do. God knows *we* don't want her! You take good care not to meet,' she observed in a still higher key, 'my question about their life. If you do consider it a thing one can even *speak* of, I congratulate you on your taste!'

The life she alluded to was of course Chad's and Madame

de Vionnet's, which she thus bracketed together in a way that made him wince a little; there being nothing for him but to take home her full intention. It was none the less his inconsequence that while he had himself been enjoying for weeks the view of the brilliant woman's specific action, he just suffered from any characterisation of it by other lips. 'I think tremendously well of her, at the same time that I seem to feel her "life" to be really none of my business. It's my business, that is, only so far as Chad's own life is affected by it; and what has happened, don't you see? is that Chad's has been affected so beautifully. The proof of the pudding's in the eating.'—He tried, with no great success, to help it out with a touch of pleasantry, while she let him go on as if to sink and sink. He went on however well enough, as well as he could do without fresh counsel; he indeed shouldn't stand quite firm, he felt, till he should have re-established his communications with Chad. Still, he could always speak for the woman he had so definitely promised to 'save'. This wasn't quite for her the air of salvation; but as that chill fairly deepened what did it become but a reminder that one might at the worst perish *with* her? And it was simple enough—it was rudimentary: not, not to give her away. 'I find in her more merits than you would probably have patience with my counting over. And do you know,' he inquired, 'the effect you produce on me by alluding to her in such terms? It's as if you had some motive in not recognising all she has done for your brother, and so shut your eyes to each side of the matter, in order, whichever side comes up, to get rid of the other. I don't, you must allow me to say, see how you can with any pretence to candour get rid of the side nearest you.'

'Near me—*that* sort of thing?' And Sarah gave a jerk back of her head that well might have nullified any active proximity.

It kept her friend himself at his distance, and he respected for a moment the interval. Then with a last persuasive effort he bridged it. 'You don't, on your honour, appreciate Chad's fortunate development?'

'Fortunate?' she echoed again. And indeed she was prepared. 'I call it hideous.'

Her departure had been for some minutes marked as imminent, and she was already at the door that stood open to the court, from the threshold of which she delivered herself of this judgment. It rang out so loud as to produce for the time the hush of everything else. Strether quite, as an effect of it, breathed less bravely; he could acknowledge it, but simply enough. 'Oh if you think *that*——!'

'Then all's at an end? So much the better. I do think that!' She passed out as she spoke and took her way straight across the court, beyond which, separated from them by the deep arch of the porte-cochère, the low victoria that had conveyed her from her own hotel was drawn up. She made for it with decision, and the manner of her break, the sharp shaft of her rejoinder, had an intensity by which Strether was at first kept in arrest. She had let fly at him as from a stretched cord, and it took him a minute to recover from the sense of being pierced. It was not the penetration of surprise; it was that, much more, of certainty; his case being put for him as he had as yet only put it to himself. She was away at any rate; she had distanced him—with rather a grand spring, an effect of pride and ease, after all; she had got into her carriage before he could overtake her, and the vehicle was already in motion. He stopped half way; he stood there in the court only seeing her go and noting that she gave him no other look. The way he had put it to himself was that all quite *might* be at an end. Each of her movements, in this resolute rupture, reaffirmed, reenforced that idea. Sarah passed out of sight in the sunny street while, planted there in the centre of the comparatively grey court, he continued merely to look before him. It probably *was* all at an end.

BOOK ELEVENTH

I

HE WENT late that evening to the Boulevard Malesherbes, having his impression that it would be vain to go early, and having also, more than once in the course of the day, made inquiries of the concierge. Chad hadn't come in and had left no intimation; he had affairs, apparently, at this juncture as it occurred to Strether he so well might have—that kept him long abroad. Our friend asked once for him at the hotel in the Rue de Rivoli, but the only contribution offered there was the fact that every one was out. It was with the idea that he would have to come home to sleep that Strether went up to his rooms, from which however he was still absent, though, from the balcony, a few moments later, his visitor heard eleven o'clock strike. Chad's servant had by this time answered for his reappearance; he *had*, the visitor learned, come quickly in to dress for dinner and vanish again. Strether spent an hour in waiting for him—an hour full of strange suggestions, persuasions, recognitions; one of those that he was to recall, at the end of his adventure, as the particular handful that most had counted. The mellowest lamplight and the easiest chair had been placed at his disposal by Baptiste, subtlest of servants; the novel half uncut, the novel lemon-coloured and tender, with the ivory knife athwart it like a dagger in a contadina's hair, had been pushed within the soft circle—a circle which, for some reason, affected Strether as softer still after the same Baptiste had remarked that in the absence of a further need of anything by Monsieur he would betake himself to bed. The night was hot and heavy and the single lamp sufficient; the great flare of the lighted city, rising high, spending itself afar, played up from the Boulevard and, through the vague

vista of the successive rooms, brought objects into view and added to their dignity. Strether found himself in possession as he never yet had been; he had been there alone, had turned over books and prints, had invoked, in Chad's absence, the spirit of the place, but never at the witching hour and never with a relish quite so like a pang.

He spent a long time on the balcony; he hung over it as he had seen little Bilham hang the day of his first approach, as he had seen Mamie hang over her own the day little Bilham himself might have seen her from below; he passed back into the rooms, the three that occupied the front and that communicated by wide doors; and, while he circulated and rested, tried to recover the impression that they had made on him three months before, to catch again the voice in which they had seemed then to speak to him. That voice, he had to note, failed audibly to sound; which he took as the proof of all the change in himself. He had heard, of old, only what he *could* then hear; what he could do now was to think of three months ago as a point in the far past. All voices had grown thicker and meant more things; they crowded on him as he moved about—it was the way they sounded together that wouldn't let him be still. He felt, strangely, as sad as if he had come for some wrong, and yet as excited as if he had come for some freedom. But the freedom was what was most in the place and the hour; it was the freedom that most brought him round again to the youth of his own that he had long ago missed. He could have explained little enough to-day either why he had missed it or why, after years and years, he should care that he had; the main truth of the actual appeal of everything was none the less that everything represented the substance of his loss, put it within reach, within touch, made it, to a degree it had never been, an affair of the senses. That was what it became for him at this singular time, the youth he had long ago missed—a queer concrete presence, full of mystery, yet full of reality, which he could handle, taste, smell, the deep breathing of which he could positively hear. It was in the outside air as well as within; it was in the

long watch, from the balcony, in the summer night, of the wide late life of Paris, the unceasing soft quick rumble, below, of the little lighted carriages that, in the press, always suggested the gamblers he had seen of old at Monte Carlo pushing up to the tables. This image was before him when he at last became aware that Chad was behind.

'She tells me you put it all on *me*'—he had arrived after this promptly enough at that information; which expressed the case however quite as the young man appeared willing for the moment to leave it. Other things, with this advantage of their virtually having the night before them, came up for them, and had, as well, the odd effect of making the occasion, instead of hurried and feverish, one of the largest, loosest and easiest to which Strether's whole adventure was to have treated him. He had been pursuing Chad from an early hour and had overtaken him only now; but now the delay was repaired by their being so exceptionally confronted. They had foregathered enough of course in all the various times; they had again and again, since that first night at the theatre, been face to face over their question; but they had never been so alone together as they were actually alone—their talk hadn't been so supremely for themselves. And if many things moreover passed before them, none passed more distinctly for Strether than that striking truth about Chad of which he had been so often moved to take note: the truth that everything came happily back with him to his knowing how to live. It had been seated in his pleased smile—a smile that pleased exactly in the right degree—as his visitor turned round, on the balcony, to greet his advent; his visitor in fact felt on the spot that there was nothing their meeting would so much do as bear witness to that facility. He surrendered himself accordingly to so approved a gift; for what was the meaning of the facility but that others *did* surrender themselves? He didn't want, luckily, to prevent Chad from living; but he was quite aware that even if he had he would himself have thoroughly gone to pieces. It was in truth essentially by bringing down his personal life to a function all sub-

sidiary to the young man's own that he held together. And the great point, above all, the sign of how completely Chad possessed the knowledge in question, was that one thus became, not only with a proper cheerfulness, but with wild native impulses, the feeder of his stream. Their talk had accordingly not lasted three minutes without Strether's feeling basis enough for the excitement in which he had waited. This overflow fairly deepened, wastefully abounded, as he observed the smallness of anything corresponding to it on the part of his friend. That was exactly this friend's happy case; he 'put out' his excitement, or whatever other emotion the matter involved, as he put out his washing; than which no arrangement could make more for domestic order. It was quite for Strether himself in short to feel a personal analogy with the laundress bringing home the triumphs of the mangle.

When he had reported on Sarah's visit, which he did very fully, Chad answered his question with perfect candour. 'I positively referred her to you—told her she must absolutely see you. This was last night, and it all took place in ten minutes. It was our first free talk—really the first time she had tackled me. She knew I also knew what her line had been with yourself; knew moreover how little you had been doing to make anything difficult for her. So I spoke for you frankly—assured her you were all at her service. I assured her *I* was too,' the young man continued; 'and I pointed out how she could perfectly, at any time, have got at me. Her difficulty has been simply her not finding the moment she fancied.'

'Her difficulty,' Strether returned, 'has been simply that she finds she's afraid of you. She's not afraid of me, Sarah, one little scrap; and it was just because she has seen how I can fidget when I give my mind to it that she has felt her best chance, rightly enough, to be in making me as uneasy as possible. I think she's at bottom as pleased to *have* you put it on me as you yourself can possibly be to put it.'

'But what in the world, my dear man,' Chad inquired in

objection to this luminosity, 'have I done to make Sally afraid?'

'You've been "wonderful, wonderful", as we say—we poor people who watch the play from the pit; and that's what has, admirably, made her. Made her all the more effectually that she could see you didn't set about it on purpose—I mean set about affecting her as with fear.'

Chad cast a pleasant backward glance over his possibilities of motive. 'I've only wanted to be kind and friendly, to be decent and attentive—and I still only want to be.'

Strether smiled at his comfortable clearness. 'Well, there can certainly be no way for it better than by my taking the onus. It reduces your personal friction and your personal offence to almost nothing.'

Ah but Chad, with his completer conception of the friendly, wouldn't quite have this! They had remained on the balcony, where, after their day of great and premature heat, the midnight air was delicious; and they leaned back in turn against the balustrade, all in harmony with the chairs and the flower-pots, the cigarettes and the starlight. 'The onus isn't *really* yours—after our agreeing so to wait together and judge together. That was all my answer to Sally,' Chad pursued—'that we have been, that we are, just judging together.'

'I'm not afraid of the burden,' Strether explained; 'I haven't come in the least that you should take it off me. I've come very much, it seems to me, to double up my fore legs in the manner of the camel when he gets down on his knees to make his back convenient. But I've supposed you all this while to have been doing a lot of special and private judging—about which I haven't troubled you; and I've only wished to have your conclusion first from you. I don't ask more than that; I'm quite ready to take it as it has come.'

Chad turned up his face to the sky with a slow puff of his smoke. 'Well, I've seen.'

Strether waited a little. 'I've left you wholly alone; haven't, I think I may say, since the first hour or two—

when I merely preached patience—so much as breathed on you.'

'Oh you've been awfully good!'

'We've both been good then—we've played the game. We've given them the most liberal conditions.'

'Ah,' said Chad, 'splendid conditions! It was open to them, open to them'—he seemed to make it out, as he smoked, with his eyes still on the stars. He might in quiet sport have been reading their horoscope. Strether wondered meanwhile what had been open to them, and he finally let him have it. 'It was open to them simply to let me alone; to have made up their minds, on really seeing me for themselves, that I could go on well enough as I was.'

Strether assented to this proposition with full lucidity, his companion's plural pronoun, which stood all for Mrs Newsome and her daughter, having no ambiguity for him. There was nothing, apparently, to stand for Mamie and Jim; and this added to our friend's sense of Chad's knowing what he thought. 'But they've made up their minds to the opposite—that you *can't* go on as you are.'

'No,' Chad continued in the same way; 'they won't have it for a minute.'

Strether on his side also reflectively smoked. It was as if their high place really represented some moral elevation from which they could look down on their recent past. 'There never was the smallest chance, do you know, that they *would* have it for a moment.'

'Of course not—no real chance. But if they were willing to think that there was——!'

'They weren't willing.' Strether had worked it all out. 'It wasn't for you they came out, but for me. It wasn't to see for themselves what you're doing, but what I'm doing. The first branch of their curiosity was inevitably destined, under my culpable delay, to give way to the second; and it's on the second that, if I may use the expression and you don't mind my marking the invidious fact, they've been of late exclusively perched. When Sarah sailed it was me, in other words, they were after.'

Chad took it in both with intelligence and with indulgence. 'It *is* rather a business then—what I've let you in for!'

Strether had again a brief pause; which ended in a reply that seemed to dispose once and for all of this element of compunction. Chad was to treat it, at any rate, so far as they were again together, as having done so. 'I was "in" when you found me.'

'Ah but it was you,' the young man laughed, 'who found *me*.'

'I only found you out. It was you who found me in. It was all in the day's work for them, at all events, that they should come. And they greatly enjoyed it,' Strether declared.

'Well, I've tried to make them,' said Chad.

His companion did himself presently the same justice. 'So have I. I tried even this very morning—while Mrs Pocock was with me. She enjoys for instance, almost as much as anything else, not being, as I've said, afraid of me; and I think I gave her help in that.'

Chad took a deeper interest. 'Was she very nasty?'

Strether debated. 'Well, she was the important thing—she was definite. She was—at last—crystalline. And I felt no remorse. I saw that they must have come.'

'Oh I wanted to see them for myself; so that if it were only for *that*——!' Chad's own remorse was as small.

This appeared almost all Strether wanted. 'Isn't your having seen them for yourself then *the* thing, beyond all others, that has come of their visit?'

Chad looked as if he thought it nice of his old friend to put it so. 'Don't you count it as anything that you're dished—if you *are* dished? Are you, my dear man, dished?'

It sounded as if he were asking if he had caught cold or hurt his foot, and Strether for a minute but smoked and smoked. 'I want to see her again. I must see her.'

'Of course you must.' Then Chad hesitated. 'Do you mean—a—Mother herself?'

'Oh your mother—that will depend.'

It was as if Mrs Newsome had somehow been placed by the words very far off. Chad however endeavoured in spite of this to reach the place. 'What do you mean it will depend on?'

Strether, for all answer, gave him a longish look. 'I was speaking of Sarah. I must positively—though she quite cast me off—see *her* again. I can't part with her that way.'

'Then she was awfully unpleasant?'

Again Strether exhaled. 'She was what she had to be. I mean that from the moment they're not delighted they can only be—well what I admit she was. We gave them,' he went on, 'their chance to be delighted, and they've walked up to it, and looked all round it, and not taken it.'

'You can bring a horse to water——!' Chad suggested.

'Precisely. And the tune to which this morning Sarah wasn't delighted—the tune to which, to adopt your metaphor, she refused to drink—leaves us on that side nothing more to hope.'

Chad had a pause, and then as if consolingly: 'It was never of course really the least on the cards that they would be "delighted".'

'Well, I don't know, after all,' Strether mused. 'I've had to come as far round. However'—he shook it off—'it's doubtless *my* performance that's absurd.'

'There are certainly moments,' said Chad, 'when you seem to me too good to be true. Yet if you are true,' he added, 'that seems to be all that need concern me.'

'I'm true, but I'm incredible. I'm fantastic and ridiculous —I don't explain myself even *to* myself. How can they then,' Strether asked, 'understand me? So I don't quarrel with them.'

'I see. They quarrel,' said Chad rather comfortably, 'with *us*.' Strether noted once more the comfort, but his young friend had already gone on. 'I should feel greatly ashamed, all the same, if I didn't put it before you again that you ought to think, after all, tremendously well. I mean before giving up beyond recall——' With which insistence, as from a certain delicacy, dropped.

Ah but Strether wanted it. 'Say it all, say it all.'

'Well, at your age, and with what—when all's said and done—Mother might do for you and be for you.'

Chad had said it all, from his natural scruple, only to that extent; so that Strether after an instant himself took a hand. 'My absence of an assured future. The little I have to show toward the power to take care of myself. The way, the wonderful way, she would certainly take care of me. Her fortune, her kindness, and the constant miracle of her having been disposed to go even so far. Of course, of course,'—he summed it up. 'There are those sharp facts.'

Chad had meanwhile thought of another still. 'And don't you really care——?'

His friend slowly turned round to him. 'Will you go?'

'I'll go if you say you now consider I should. You know,' he went on, 'I was ready six weeks ago.'

'Ah,' said Strether, 'that was when you didn't know *I* wasn't! You're ready at present because you do know it.'

'That may be,' Chad returned; 'but all the same I'm sincere. You talk about taking the whole thing on your shoulders, but in what light do you regard me that you think me capable of letting you pay?' Strether patted his arm, as they stood together against the parapet, reassuringly —seeming to wish to contend that he *had* the wherewithal; but it was again round this question of purchase and price that the young man's sense of fairness continued to hover. 'What it literally comes to for you, if you'll pardon my putting it so, is that you give up money. Possibly a good deal of money.'

'Oh,' Strether laughed, 'if it were only just enough you'd still be justified in putting it so! But I've on my side to remind you too that *you* give up money; and more than "possibly"—quite certainly, as I should suppose—a good deal.'

'True enough; but I've got a certain quantity,' Chad returned after a moment. 'Whereas you, my dear man, you——'

'I can't be at all said'—Strether took him up—'to have a "quantity" certain or uncertain? Very true. Still, I shan't starve.'

'Oh you mustn't *starve!*' Chad pacifically emphasised; and so, in the pleasant conditions, they continued to talk; though there was, for that matter, a pause in which the younger companion might have been taken as weighing against the delicacy of his then and there promising the elder some provision against the possibility just mentioned. This, however, he presumably thought best not to do, for at the end of another minute they had moved in quite a different direction. Strether had broken in by returning to the subject of Chad's passage with Sarah and inquiring if they had arrived, in the event, at anything in the nature of a 'scene'. To this Chad replied that they had on the contrary kept tremendously polite; adding moreover that Sally was after all not the woman to have made the mistake of not being. 'Her hands are a good deal tied, you see. I got so, from the first,' he sagaciously observed, 'the start of her.'

'You mean she has taken so much from you?'

'Well, I couldn't of course in common decency give less; only she hadn't expected, I think, that I'd give her nearly so much. And she began to take it before she knew it.'

'And she began to like it,' said Strether, 'as soon as she began to take it!'

'Yes, she has liked it—also more than she expected.' After which Chad observed: 'But she doesn't like *me*. In fact she hates me.'

Strether's interest grew. 'Then why does she want you at home?'

'Because when you hate you want to triumph, and if she should get me neatly stuck there she *would* triumph.'

Strether followed afresh, but looking as he went. 'Certainly—in a manner. But it would scarce be a triumph worth having if, once entangled, feeling her dislike and possibly conscious in time of a certain quantity of your own, you should on the spot make yourself unpleasant to her.'

'Ah,' said Chad, 'she can bear *me*—could bear me at least

at home. It's my being there that would be her triumph. She hates me in Paris.'

'She hates in other words——'

'Yes, *that's* it!'—Chad had quickly understood this understanding; which formed on the part of each as near an approach as they had yet made to naming Madame de Vionnet. The limitations of their distinctness didn't, however, prevent its fairly lingering in the air that it was this lady Mrs Pocock hated. It added one more touch moreover to their established recognition of the rare intimacy of Chad's association with her. He had never yet more twitched away the last veil from this phenomenon than in presenting himself as confounded and submerged in the feeling she had created at Woollett. 'And I'll tell you who hates me too,' he immediately went on.

Strether knew as immediately whom he meant, but with as prompt a protest. 'Ah no! Mamie doesn't hate—well,' he caught himself in time—'anybody at all. Mamie's beautiful.'

Chad shook his head. 'That's just why I mind it. She certainly doesn't like me.'

'How much do you mind it? What would you do for her?'

'Well, I'd like her if she'd like me. Really, really,' Chad declared.

It gavè his companion a moment's pause. 'You asked me just now if I don't, as you said, "care" about a certain person. You rather tempt me therefore to put the question in my turn. Don't *you* care about a certain other person?'

Chad looked at him hard in the lamplight of the window. 'The difference is that I don't want to.'

Strether wondered. '"Don't want to"?'

'I try not to—that is, I *have* tried. I've done my best. You can't be surprised,' the young man easily went on, 'when you yourself set me on it. I was indeed,' he added, 'already on it a little; but you set me harder. It was six weeks ago that I thought I had come out.'

Strether took it well in. 'But you haven't come out!

'I don't know—it's what I *want* to know,' said Chad. 'And if I could have sufficiently wanted—by myself——to go back, I think I might have found out.'

'Possibly'—Strether considered. 'But all you were able to achieve was to want to want to! And even then,' he pursued, 'only till our friends there came. Do you want to sit still?' As with a sound half-dolorous, half-droll and all vague and equivocal, Chad buried his face for a little in his hands, rubbing it in a whimsical way that amounted to an evasion, he brought it out more sharply: '*Do* you?'

Chad kept for a time his attitude, but at last he looked up, and then, abruptly, 'Jim *is* a damned dose!' he declared.

'Oh I don't ask you to abuse or describe or in any way pronounce on your relatives; I simply put it to you once more whether you're *now* ready. You say you've "seen". Is what you've seen that you can't resist?'

Chad gave him a strange smile—the nearest approach he had ever shown to a troubled one. 'Can't you make me *not* resist?'

'What it comes to,' Strether went on very gravely now and as if he hadn't heard him, 'what it comes to is that more has been done for you, I think, than I've ever seen done—attempted perhaps, but never so successfully done—by one human being for another.'

'Oh an immense deal certainly'—Chad did it full justice. 'And you yourself are adding to it.'

It was without heeding this either that his visitor continued. 'And our friends there won't have it.'

'No, they simply won't.'

'They demand you on the basis, as it were, of repudiation and ingratitude; and what has been the matter with me,' Strether went on, 'is that I haven't seen my way to working with you for repudiation.'

Chad appreciated this. 'Then as you haven't seen yours you naturally haven't seen mine. There it is.' After which he proceeded, with a certain abruptness, to a sharp interrogation. '*Now* do you say she doesn't hate me?'

Strether hesitated. '"She"——?'

'Yes—Mother. We called it Sarah, but it comes to the same thing.'

'Ah,' Strether objected, 'not to the same thing as her hating *you*.'

On which—though as if for an instant it had hung fire—Chad remarkably replied: 'Well, if they hate my good friend, *that* comes to the same thing.' It had a note of inevitable truth that made Strether take it as enough, feel he wanted nothing more. The young man spoke in it for his 'good friend' more than he had ever yet directly spoken, confessed to such deep identities between them as he might play with the idea of working free from, but which at a given moment could still draw him down like a whirlpool. And meanwhile he had gone on. 'Their hating you too moreover—that also comes to a good deal.'

'Ah,' said Strether, 'your mother doesn't.'

Chad, however, loyally stuck to it—loyally, that is, to Strether. 'She will if you don't look out.'

'Well, I do look out. I am, after all, looking out. That's just why,' our friend explained, 'I want to see her again.'

It drew from Chad again the same question. 'To see Mother?'

'To see—for the present—Sarah.'

'Ah then there you are! And what I don't for the life of me make out,' Chad pursued with resigned perplexity, 'is what you *gain* by it.'

Oh it would have taken his companion too long to say! 'That's because you have, I verily believe, no imagination. You've other qualities. But no imagination, don't you see? at all.'

'I dare say. I do see.' It was an idea in which Chad showed interest. 'But haven't you yourself rather too much?'

'Oh, *rather*——!' So that after an instant under this reproach and as if it were at last a fact really to escape from, Strether made his move for departure.

II

ONE OF the features of the restless afternoon passed by him after Mrs Pocock's visit was an hour spent, shortly before dinner, with Maria Gostrey, whom of late, in spite of so sustained a call on his attention from other quarters, he had by no means neglected. And that he was still not neglecting her will appear from the fact that he was with her again at the same hour on the very morrow—with no less fine a consciousness moreover of being able to hold her ear. It continued inveterately to occur, for that matter, that whenever he had taken one of his greater turns he came back to where she so faithfully awaited him. None of these excursions had on the whole been livelier than the pair of incidents—the fruit of the short interval since his previous visit—on which he had now to report to her. He had seen Chad Newsome late the night before, and he had had that morning, as a sequel to this conversation, a second interview with Sarah. 'But they're all off,' he said, 'at last.'

It puzzled her a moment. 'All?—Mr Newsome with them?'

'Ah not yet! Sarah and Jim and Mamie. But Waymarsh with them—for Sarah. It's too beautiful,' Strether continued; 'I find I don't get over that—it's always a fresh joy. But it's a fresh joy too,' he added, 'that—well what do you think? Little Bilham also goes. But he of course goes for Mamie.'

Miss Gostrey wondered. '"For" her? Do you mean they're already engaged?'

'Well,' said Strether, 'say then for *me*. He'll do anything for me; just as I will, for that matter—anything I can—for him. Or for Mamie either. *She'll* do anything for me.'

Miss Gostrey gave a comprehensive sigh. 'The way you reduce people to subjection!'

'It's certainly, on one side, wonderful. But it's quite

equalled, on another, by the way I don't. I haven't reduced Sarah, since yesterday; though I've succeeded in seeing her again, as I'll presently tell you. The others, however, are all right. Mamie, by that blessed law of ours, absolutely must have a young man.'

'But what must poor Mr Bilham have? Do you mean they'll *marry* for you?'

'I mean that, by the same blessed law, it won't matter a grain if they don't—I shan't have in the least to worry.'

She saw as usual what he meant. 'And Mr Jim?—who goes for him?'

'Oh,' Strether had to admit, 'I couldn't manage *that*. He's thrown, as usual, on the world; the world which, after all, by his account—for he had prodigious adventures—seems very good to him. He fortunately—"over here", as he says—finds the world everywhere; and his most prodigious adventure of all,' he went on, 'has been of course of the last few days.'

Miss Gostrey, already knowing, instantly made the connexion. 'He has seen Marie de Vionnet again?'

'He went, all by himself, the day after Chad's party—didn't I tell you?—to tea with her. By her invitation—all alone.'

'Quite like yourself!' Maria smiled.

'Oh but he's more wonderful about her than I am!' And then as his friend showed how she could believe it, filling it out, fitting it on to old memories of the wonderful woman: 'What I should have liked to manage would have been *her* going.'

'To Switzerland with the party?'

'For Jim and for symmetry. If it had been workable moreover for a fortnight she'd have gone. She's ready'—he followed up his renewed vision of her—'for anything.'

Miss Gostrey went with him a minute. 'She's too perfect!'

'She *will*, I think,' he pursued, 'go to-night to the station.'

'To see him off?'

'With Chad—marvellously—as part of their general

attention. And she does it'—it kept before him—'with a light, light grace, a free, free gaiety, that may well softly bewilder Mr Pocock.'

It kept so before him that his companion had after an instant a friendly comment. 'As in short it has softly bewildered a saner man. Are you really in love with her?' Maria threw off.

'It's of no importance I should know,' he replied. 'It matters so little—has nothing to do, practically, with either of us.'

'All the same'—Maria continued to smile—'they go, the five, as I understand you, and you and Madame de Vionnet stay.'

'Oh and Chad.' To which Strether added: 'And you.'

'Ah "me"!'—she gave a small impatient wail again, in which something of the unreconciled seemed suddenly to break out. '*I* don't stay, it somehow seems to me, much to my advantage. In the presence of all you cause to pass before me I've a tremendous sense of privation.'

Strether hesitated. 'But your privation, your keeping out of everything, has been—hasn't it?—by your own choice.'

'Oh yes; it has been necessary—that is it has been better for you. What I mean is only that I seem to have ceased to serve you.'

'How can you tell that?' he asked. 'You don't know how you serve me. When you cease——'

'Well?' she said as he dropped.

'Well, I'll *let* you know. Be quiet till then.'

She thought a moment. 'Then you positively like me to stay?'

'Don't I treat you as if I did?'

'You're certainly very kind to me. But that,' said Maria 'is for myself. It's getting late, as you see, and Paris turning rather hot and dusty. People are scattering, and some of them, in other places, want me. But if you want me here——!'

She had spoken as resigned to his word, but he had of a

sudden a still sharper sense than he would have expected of desiring not to lose her. 'I want you here.'

She took it as if the words were all she had wished; as if they brought her, gave her something that was the compensation of her case. 'Thank you,' she simply answered. And then as he looked at her a little harder, 'Thank you very much,' she repeated.

It had broken as with a slight arrest into the current of their talk, and it held him a moment longer. 'Why, two months, or whatever the time was, ago, did you suddenly dash off? The reason you afterwards gave me for keeping away three weeks wasn't the real one.'

She recalled. 'I never supposed you believed it was. Yet,' she continued, 'if you didn't guess it that was just what helped you.'

He looked away from her on this; he indulged, so far as space permitted, in one of his slow absences. 'I've often thought of it, but never to feel that I could guess it. And you see the consideration with which I've treated you in never asking till now.'

'Now then why *do* you ask?'

'To show you how I miss you when you're not here, and what it does for me.'

'It doesn't seem to have done,' she laughed, 'all it might! However,' she added, 'if you've really never guessed the truth I'll tell you.'

'I've never guessed it,' Strether declared.

'Never?'

'Never.'

'Well then I dashed off, as you say, so as not to have the confusion of being there if Marie de Vionnet should tell you anything to my detriment.'

He looked as if he considerably doubted. 'You even then would have had to face it on your return.'

'Oh if I had found reason to believe it something very bad I'd have left you altogether.'

'So then,' he continued, 'it was only on guessing she had been on the whole merciful that you ventured back?'

Maria kept it together. 'I owe her thanks. Whatever her temptation she didn't separate us. That's one of my reasons,' she went on, 'for admiring her so.'

'Let it pass then,' said Strether, 'for one of mine as well. But what would have been her temptation?'

'What are ever the temptations of women?'

He thought—but hadn't, naturally, to think too long. 'Men?'

'She would have had you, with it, more for herself. But she saw she could have you without it.'

'Oh "have" me!' Strether a trifle ambiguously sighed. '*You*,' he handsomely declared, 'would have had me at any rate *with* it.'

'Oh "have" you!'—she echoed it as he had done. 'I do have you, however,' she less ironically said, 'from the moment you express a wish.'

He stopped before her, full of the disposition. 'I'll express fifty.'

Which indeed begot in her, with a certain inconsequence, a return of her small wail. 'Ah there you are!'

There, if it were so, he continued for the rest of the time to be, and it was as if to show her how she could still serve him that, coming back to the departure of the Pococks, he gave her the view, vivid with a hundred more touches than we can reproduce, of what had happened for him that morning. He had had ten minutes with Sarah at her hotel, ten minutes reconquered, by irresistible pressure, from the time over which he had already described her to Miss Gostrey as having, at the end of their interview on his own premises, passed the great sponge of the future. He had caught her by not announcing himself, had found her in her sitting-room with a dressmaker and a *lingère* whose accounts she appeared to have been more or less ingenuously settling and who soon withdrew. Then he had explained to her how he had succeeded, late the night before, in keeping his promise of seeing Chad. 'I told her I'd take it all.'

'You'd "take" it?'

'Why if he doesn't go.'

Maria waited. 'And who takes it if he does?' she inquired with a certain grimness of gaiety.

'Well,' said Strether, 'I think I take, in any event, everything.'

'By which I suppose you mean,' his companion brought out after a moment, 'that you definitely understand you now lose everything.'

He stood before her again. 'It does come perhaps to the same thing. But Chad, now that he has seen, doesn't really want it.'

She could believe that, but she made, as always, for clearness. 'Still, what, after all, *has* he seen?'

'What they want of him. And it's enough.'

'It contrasts so unfavourably with what Madame de Vionnet wants?'

'It contrasts—just so; all round, and tremendously.'

'Therefore, perhaps, most of all with what *you* want?'

'Oh,' said Strether, 'what I want is a thing I've ceased to measure or even to understand.'

But his friend none the less went on. 'Do you want Mrs Newsome—after such a way of treating you?'

It was a straighter mode of dealing with this lady than they had as yet—such was their high form—permitted themselves; but it seemed not wholly for this that he delayed a moment. 'I dare say it has been, after all, the only way she could have imagined.'

'And does that make you want her any more?'

'I've tremendously disappointed her,' Strether thought it worth while to mention.

'Of course you have. That's rudimentary; that was plain to us long ago. But isn't it almost as plain,' Maria went on, 'that you've even yet your straight remedy? Really drag him away, as I believe you still can, and you'd cease to have to count with her disappointment.'

'Ah then,' he laughed, 'I should have to count with yours!'

But this barely struck her now. 'What, in that case, should

you call counting? You haven't come out where you are, I think, to please *me*.'

'Oh,' he insisted, 'that too, you know, has been part of it. I can't separate—it's all one; and that's perhaps why, as I say, I don't understand.' But he was ready to declare again that this didn't in the least matter; all the more that, as he affirmed, he *hadn't* really as yet 'come out'. 'She gives me after all, on its coming to the pinch, a last mercy, another chance. They don't sail, you see, for five or six weeks more, and they haven't—she admits that—expected Chad would take part in their tour. It's still open to him to join them, at the last, at Liverpool.'

Miss Gostrey considered. 'How in the world is it "open" unless you open it? How can he join them at Liverpool if he but sinks deeper into his situation here?'

'He has given her—as I explained to you that she let me know yesterday—his word of honour to do as I say.'

Maria stared. 'But if you say nothing!'

Well, he as usual walked about on it. 'I did say something this morning. I gave her my answer—the word I had promised her after hearing from himself what *he* had promised. What she demanded of me yesterday, you'll remember, was the engagement then and there to make him take up this vow.'

'Well then,' Miss Gostrey inquired, 'was the purpose of your visit to her only to decline?'

'No; it was to ask, odd as that may seem to you, for another delay.'

'Ah that's weak!'

'Precisely!' She had spoken with impatience, but, so far as that at least, he knew where he was. 'If I *am* weak I want to find it out. If I don't find it out I shall have the comfort, the little glory, of thinking I'm strong.'

'It's all the comfort, I judge,' she returned, 'that you *will* have!'

'At any rate,' he said, 'it will have been a month more. Paris may grow, from day to day, hot and dusty, as you say; but there are other things that are hotter and dustier.

I'm not afraid to stay on; the summer here must be amusing in a wild—if it isn't a tame—way of its own; the place at no time more picturesque. I think I shall like it. And then,' he benevolently smiled for her, 'there will be always you.'

'Oh,' she objected, 'it won't be as a part of the picturesqueness that I shall stay, for I shall be the plainest thing about you. You may, you see, at any rate,' she pursued, 'have nobody else. Madame de Vionnet may very well be going off, mayn't she?—and Mr Newsome by the same stroke; unless indeed you've had an assurance from them to the contrary. So that if your idea's to stay for them'—it was her duty to suggest it—'you may be left in the lurch. Of course if they do stay'—she kept it up—'they would be part of the picturesqueness. Or else indeed you might join them somewhere.'

Strether seemed to face it as if it were a happy thought; but the next moment he spoke more critically. 'Do you mean that they'll probably go off together?'

She just considered. 'I think it will be treating you quite without ceremony if they do; though after all,' she added, 'it would be difficult to see now quite what degree of ceremony properly meets your case.'

'Of course,' Strether conceded, 'my attitude toward them is extraordinary.'

'Just so; so that one may ask one's self what style of proceeding on their own part can altogether match it. The attitude of their own that won't pale in its light they've doubtless still to work out. The really handsome thing perhaps,' she presently threw off, '*would* be for them to withdraw into more secluded conditions, offering at the same time to share them with you.' He looked at her, on this, as if some generous irritation—all in his interest—had suddenly again flickered in her; and what she next said indeed half explained it. 'Don't really be afraid to tell me if what now holds you *is* the pleasant prospect of the empty town, with plenty of seats in the shade, cool drinks, deserted museums, drives to the Bois in the evening, and our

wonderful woman all to yourself.' And she kept it up still more. 'The handsomest thing of *all*, when one makes it out, would, I dare say, be that Mr Chad should for a while go off by himself. It's a pity, from that point of view,' she wound up, 'that he doesn't pay his mother a visit. It would at least occupy your interval.' The thought in fact held her a moment. 'Why doesn't he pay his mother a visit? Even a week, at this good moment, would do.'

'My dear lady,' Strether replied—and he had it even to himself surprisingly ready—'my dear lady, his mother has paid *him* a visit. Mrs Newsome has been with him, this month, with an intensity that I'm sure he has thoroughly felt; he has lavishly entertained her, and she has let him have her thanks. Do you suggest he shall go back for more of them?'

Well, she succeeded after a little in shaking it off. 'I see. It's what you don't suggest—what you haven't suggested. And you know.'

'So would you, my dear,' he kindly said, 'if you had so much as seen her.'

'As seen Mrs Newsome?'

'No, Sarah—which, both for Chad and for myself, has served all the purpose.'

'And served it in a manner,' she responsively mused, 'so extraordinary!'

'Well, you see,' he partly explained, 'what it comes to is that she's all cold thought—which Sarah could serve to us cold without its really losing anything. So it is that we know what she thinks of us.'

Maria had followed, but she had an arrest. 'What I've never made out, if you come to that, is what you think—I mean you personally—of *her*. Don't you so much, when all's said, as care a little?'

'That,' he answered with no loss of promptness, 'is what even Chad himself asked me last night. He asked me if I don't mind the loss—well, the loss of an opulent future. Which moreover,' he hastened to add, 'was a perfectly natural question.'

'I call your attention, all the same,' said Miss Gostrey, 'to the fact that I don't ask it. What I venture to ask is whether it's to Mrs Newsome herself that you're indifferent.'

'I haven't been so'—he spoke with all assurance. 'I've been the very opposite. I've been, from the first moment, preoccupied with the impression everything might be making on her—quite oppressed, haunted, tormented by it. I've been interested *only* in her seeing what I've seen. And I've been as disappointed in her refusal to see it as she has been in what has appeared to her the perversity of my insistence.'

'Do you mean that she has shocked you as you've shocked her?'

Strether weighed it. 'I'm probably not so shockable. But on the other hand I've gone much further to meet her. She, on her side, hasn't budged an inch.'

'So that you're now at last'—Maria pointed the moral—'in the sad stage of recriminations.'

'No—it's only to you I speak. I've been like a lamb to Sarah. I've only put my back to the wall. It's to *that* one naturally staggers when one has been violently pushed there.'

She watched him a moment. 'Thrown over?'

'Well, as I feel so I've landed somewhere I think I must have been thrown.'

She turned it over, but as hoping to clarify much rather than to harmonise. 'The thing is that I suppose you've been disappointing——'

'Quite from the very first of my arrival? I dare say. I admit I was surprising even to myself.'

'And then of course,' Maria went on, 'I had much to do with it.'

'With my being surprising——?'

'That will do,' she laughed, 'if you're too delicate to call it *my* being! Naturally,' she added, 'you came over more or less for surprises.'

'Naturally!'—he valued the reminder.

'But they were to have been all for you'—she continued to piece it out—'and none of them for *her*.'

Once more he stopped before her as if she had touched the point. 'That's just her difficulty—that she doesn't admit surprises. It's a fact that, I think, describes and represents her; and it falls in with what I tell you—that she's all, as I've called it, fine cold thought. She had, to her own mind, worked the whole thing out in advance, and worked it out for me as well as for herself. Whenever she has done that, you see, there's no room left; no margin, as it were, for any alteration. She's filled as full, packed as tight, as she'll hold, and if you wish to get anything more or different either out or in——'

'You've got to make over altogether the woman herself?'

'What it comes to,' said Strether, 'is that you've got morally and intellectually to get rid of her.'

'Which would appear,' Maria returned, 'to be practically what you've done.'

But her friend threw back his head. 'I haven't touched her. She won't *be* touched. I see it now as I've never done; and she hangs together with a perfection of her own,' he went on, 'that does suggest a kind of wrong in *any* change of her composition. It was at any rate,' he wound up, 'the woman herself, as you call her, the whole moral and intellectual being or block, that Sarah brought me over to take or to leave.'

It turned Miss Gostrey to deeper thought. 'Fancy having to take at the point of the bayonet a whole moral and intellectual being or block!'

'It was in fact,' said Strether, 'what, at home, I *had* done. But somehow over there I didn't quite know it.'

'One never does, I suppose,' Miss Gostrey concurred, 'realise in advance, in such a case, the size, as you may say, of the block. Little by little it looms up. It has been looming for you more and more till at last you see it all.'

'I see it all,' he absently echoed, while his eyes might have been fixing some particularly large iceberg in a cool blue northern sea. 'It's magnificent!' he then rather oddly exclaimed.

But his friend, who was used to this kind of incon-

sequence in him, kept the thread. 'There's nothing so magnificent—for making others feel you—as to have no imagination.'

It brought him straight round. 'Ah there you are! It's what I said last night to Chad. That he himself, I mean, has none.'

'Then it would appear,' Maria suggested, 'that he has, after all, something in common with his mother.'

'He has in common that he makes one, as you say, "feel" him. And yet,' he added, as if the question were interesting, 'one feels others too, even when they have plenty.'

Miss Gostrey continued suggestive. 'Madame de Vionnet?'

'*She* has plenty.'

'Certainly—she had quantities of old. But there are different ways of making one's self felt.'

'Yes, it comes, no doubt, to that. You now——'

He was benevolently going on, but she wouldn't have it. 'Oh I *don't* make myself felt; so my quantity needn't be settled. Yours, you know,' she said, 'is monstrous. No one has ever had so much.'

It struck him for a moment. 'That's what Chad also thinks.'

'There *you* are then—though it isn't for him to complain of it!'

'Oh he doesn't complain of it,' said Strether.

'That's all that would be wanting! But apropos of what,' Maria went on, 'did the question come up?'

'Well, of his asking me what it is I gain.'

She had a pause. 'Then as I've asked you too it settles *my* case. Oh you *have*,' she repeated, 'treasures of imagination.'

But he had been for an instant thinking away from this, and he came up in another place. 'And yet Mrs Newsome —it's a thing to remember—*has* imagined, did, that is, imagine, and apparently still does, horrors about what I should have found. I was booked, by her vision—extraordinarily intense, after all—to find them; and that I didn't,

that I couldn't, that, as she evidently felt, I wouldn't—this evidently didn't at all, as they say, "suit" her book. It was more than she could bear. That was her disappointment.'

'You mean you were to have found Chad himself horrible?'

'I was to have found the woman.'

'Horrible?'

'Found her as she imagined her.' And Strether paused as if for his own expression of it he could add no touch to that picture.

His companion had meanwhile thought. 'She imagined stupidly—so it comes to the same thing.'

'Stupidly? Oh!' said Strether.

But she insisted. 'She imagined meanly.'

He had it, however, better. 'It couldn't but be ignorantly.'

'Well, intensity with ignorance—what do you want worse?'

This question might have held him, but he let it pass. 'Sarah isn't ignorant—now; she keeps up the theory of the horrible.'

'Ah but she's intense—and that by itself will do sometimes as well. If it doesn't do, in this case, at any rate, to deny that Marie's charming, it will do at least to deny that she's good.'

'What I claim is that she's good for Chad.'

'You don't claim'—she seemed to like it clear—'that she's good for *you*.'

But he continued without heeding. 'That's what I wanted them to come out for—to see for themselves if she's bad for him.'

'And now that they've done so they won't admit that she's good even for anything?'

'They do think,' Strether presently admitted, 'that she's on the whole about as bad for me. But they're consistent of course, inasmuch as they've their clear view of what's good for both of us.'

'For you, to begin with'—Maria, all responsive, confined the question for the moment—'to eliminate from your

existence and if possible even from your memory the dreadful creature that *I* must gruesomely shadow forth for them, even more than to eliminate the distincter evil—thereby a little less portentous—of the person whose confederate you've suffered yourself to become. However, that's comparatively simple. You can easily, at the worst, after all, give me up.'

'I can easily at the worst, after all, give you up.' The irony was so obvious that it needed no care. 'I can easily at the worst, after all, even forget you.'

'Call that then workable. But Mr Newsome has much more to forget. How can *he* do it?'

'Ah there again we are! That's just what I was to have made him do; just where I was to have worked with him and helped.'

She took it in silence and without attenuation—as if perhaps from very familiarity with the facts; and her thought made a connexion without showing the links. 'Do you remember how we used to talk at Chester and in London about my seeing you through?' She spoke as of far-off things and as if they had spent weeks at the places she named.

'It's just what you *are* doing.'

'Ah but the worst—since you've left such a margin—may be still to come. You may yet break down.'

'Yes, I may yet break down. But will you take me——?'

He had hesitated, and she waited. 'Take you——?'

'For as long as I can bear it.'

She also debated. 'Mr Newsome and Madame de Vionnet may, as we were saying, leave town. How long do you think you can bear it without them?'

Strether's reply to this was at first another question. 'Do you mean in order to get away from me?'

Her answer had an abruptness. 'Don't find me rude if I say I should think they'd want to!'

He looked at her hard again—seemed even for an instant to have an intensity of thought under which his colour

changed. But he smiled. 'You mean after what they've done to me?'

'After what *she* has.'

At this, however, with a laugh, he was all right again. 'Ah but she hasn't done it yet!'

III

HE HAD taken the train a few days after this from a station —as well as *to* a station—selected almost at random; such days, whatever should happen, were numbered, and he had gone forth under the impulse—artless enough, no doubt—to give the whole of one of them to that French ruralism, with its cool special green, into which he had hitherto looked only through the little oblong window of the picture-frame. It had been as yet for the most part but a land of fancy for him—the background of fiction, the medium of art, the nursery of letters; practically as distant as Greece, but practically also well-nigh as consecrated. Romance could weave itself, for Strether's sense, out of elements mild enough; and even after what he had, as he felt, lately 'been through', he could thrill a little at the chance of seeing something somewhere that would remind him of a certain small Lambinet that had charmed him, long years before, at a Boston dealer's and that he had quite absurdly never forgotten. It had been offered, he remembered, at a price he had been instructed to believe the lowest ever named for a Lambinet, a price he had never felt so poor as on having to recognise, all the same, as beyond a dream of possibility. He had dreamed—had turned and twisted possibilities for an hour: it had been the only adventure of his life in connexion with the purchase of a work of art. The adventure, it will be perceived, was modest; but the memory, beyond all reason and by some accident of association, was sweet. The little Lambinet abode with him as the picture he

would have bought—the particular production that had made him for the moment overstep the modesty of nature. He was quite aware that if he were to see it again he should perhaps have a drop or a shock, and he never found himself wishing that the wheel of time would turn it up again, just as he had seen it in the maroon-coloured, sky-lighted inner shrine of Tremont Street. It would be a different thing, however, to see the remembered mixture resolved back into its elements—to assist at the restoration to nature of the whole far-away hour: the dusty day in Boston, the background of the Fitchburg Depot, of the maroon-coloured sanctum, the special-green vision, the ridiculous price, the poplars, the willows, the rushes, the river, the sunny silvery sky, the shady woody horizon.

He observed in respect to his train almost no condition save that it should stop a few times after getting out of the *banlieue*; he threw himself on the general amiability of the day for the hint of where to alight. His theory of his excursion was that he could alight anywhere—not nearer Paris than an hour's run—on catching a suggestion of the particular note required. It made its sign, the suggestion—weather, air, light, colour and his mood all favouring—at the end of some eighty minutes; the train pulled up just at the right spot, and he found himself getting out as securely as if to keep an appointment. It will be felt of him that he could amuse himself, at his age, with very small things if it be again noted that his appointment was only with a superseded Boston fashion. He hadn't gone far without the quick confidence that it would be quite sufficiently kept. The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines; the poplars and willows, the reeds and river—a river of which he didn't know, and didn't want to know, the name—fell into a composition, full of felicity, within them; the sky was silver and turquoise and varnish; the village on the left was white and the church on the right was grey; it was all there, in short—it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet. Moreover he was freely walking about in it. He did this last, for a hour, to his heart's content, mak-

ing for the shady woody horizon and boring so deep into his impression and his idleness that he might fairly have got through them again and reached the maroon-coloured wall. It was a wonder, no doubt, that the taste of idleness for him shouldn't need more time to sweeten; but it had in fact taken the few previous days; it had been sweetening in truth ever since the retreat of the Pococks. He walked and walked as if to show himself how little he had now to do; he had nothing to do but turn off to some hillside where he might stretch himself and hear the poplars rustle, and whence—in the course of an afternoon so spent, an afternoon richly suffused too with the sense of a book in his pocket—he should sufficiently command the scene to be able to pick out just the right little rustic inn for an experiment in respect to dinner. There was a train back to Paris at 9.20, and he saw himself partaking, at the close of the day, with the enhancements of a coarse white cloth and a sanded floor, of something fried and felicitous, washed down with authentic wine; after which he might, as he liked, either stroll back to his station in the gloaming or propose for the local *carriole* and converse with his driver, a driver who naturally wouldn't fail of a stiff clean blouse, of a knitted nightcap and of the genius of response—who, in fine, would sit on the shafts, tell him what the French people were thinking, and remind him, as indeed the whole episode would incidentally do, of Maupassant. Strether heard his lips, for the first time in French air, as this vision assumed consistency, emit sounds of expressive intention without fear of his company. He had been afraid of Chad and of Maria and of Madame de Vionnet; he had been most of all afraid of Waymarsh, in whose presence, so far as they had mixed together in the light of the town, he had never without somehow paying for it aired either his vocabulary or his accent. He usually paid for it by meeting immediately afterwards Waymarsh's eye.

Such were the liberties with which his fancy played after he had turned off to the hillside that did really and truly, as well as most amiably, await him beneath the poplars, the

hillside that made him feel, for a murmurous couple of hours, how happy had been his thought. He had the sense of success, of a finer harmony in things; nothing but what had turned out as yet according to his plan. It most of all came home to him, as he lay on his back on the grass, that Sarah had really gone, that his tension was really relaxed; the peace diffused in these ideas might be delusive, but it hung about him none the less for the time. It fairly, for half an hour, sent him to sleep; he pulled his straw hat over his eyes—he had bought it the day before with a reminiscence of Waymarsh's—and lost himself anew in Lambinet. It was as if he had found out he was tired—tired not from his walk, but from that inward exercise which had known, on the whole, for three months, so little intermission. That was it—when once they were off he had dropped; this moreover was what he had dropped to, and now he was touching bottom. He was kept luxuriously quiet, soothed and amused by the consciousness of what he had found at the end of his descent. It was very much what he had told Maria Gostrey he should like to stay on for, the hugely distributed Paris of summer, alternately dazzling and dusky, with a weight lifted for him off its columns and cornices and with shade and air in the flutter of awnings as wide as avenues. It was present to him without attenuation that, reaching out, the day after making the remark, for some proof of his freedom, he had gone that very afternoon to see Madame de Vionnet. He had gone again the next day but one, and the effect of the two visits, the after-sense of the couple of hours spent with her, was almost that of fullness and frequency. The brave intention of frequency, so great with him from the moment of his finding himself unjustly suspected at Woollett, had remained rather theoretic, and one of the things he could muse about under his poplars was the source of the special shyness that had still made him careful. He had surely got rid of it now, this special shyness; what had become of it if it hadn't precisely, within the week, rubbed off?

It struck him now in fact as sufficiently plain that if he had still been careful he had been so for a reason. He had

really feared, in his behaviour, a lapse from good faith; if there was a danger of one's liking such a woman too much one's best safety was in waiting at least till one had the right to do so. In the light of the last few days the danger was fairly vivid; so that it was proportionately fortunate that the right was likewise established. It seemed to our friend that he had on each occasion profited to the utmost by the latter: how could he have done so more, he at all events asked himself, than in having immediately let her know that, if it was all the same to her, he preferred not to talk about anything tiresome? He had never in his life so sacrificed an armful of high interests as in that remark; he had never so prepared the way for the comparatively frivolous as in addressing it to Madame de Vionnet's intelligence. It hadn't been till later that he quite recalled how in conjuring away everything but the pleasant he had conjured away almost all they had hitherto talked about; it was not till later even that he remembered how, with their new tone, they hadn't so much as mentioned the name of Chad himself. One of the things that most lingered with him on his hillside was this delightful facility, with such a woman, of arriving at a new tone; he thought, as he lay on his back, of all the tones she might make possible if one were to try her, and at any rate of the probability that one could trust her to fit them to occasions. He had wanted her to feel that, as he was disinterested now, so she herself should be, and she had showed she felt it, and he had showed he was grateful, and it had been for all the world as if he were calling for the first time. They had had other, but irrelevant, meetings; it was quite as if, had they sooner known how much they *really* had in common, there were quantities of comparatively dull matters they might have skipped. Well, they were skipping them now, even to graceful gratitude, even to handsome 'Don't mention it!'—and it was amazing what could still come up without reference to what had been going on between them. It might have been, on analysis, nothing more than Shakespeare and the musical glasses; but it had served all the purpose of his appearing to have said

to her: 'Don't like me, if it's a question of liking me, for anything obvious and clumsy that I've, as they call it, "done" for you: like me—well, like me, hang it, for anything else you choose. So, by the same propriety, don't be for me simply the person I've come to know through my awkward connexion with Chad—was ever anything, by the way, *more* awkward? Be for me, please, with all your admirable tact and trust, just whatever I may show you it's a present pleasure to me to think you.' It had been a large indication to meet; but if she hadn't met it what *had* she done, and how had their time together slipped along so smoothly, mild but now slow, and melting, liquefying, into his happy illusion of idleness? He could recognise on the other hand that he had probably not been without reason, in his prior, his restricted state, for keeping an eye on his liability to lapse from good faith.

He really continued in the picture—that being for himself his situation—all the rest of this rambling day; so that the charm was still, was indeed more than ever upon him when, towards six o'clock, he found himself amicably engaged with a stout white-capped deep-voiced woman at the door of the *auberge* of the biggest village, a village that affected him as a thing of whiteness, blueness and crookedness, set in coppery green, and that had the river flowing behind or before it—one couldn't say which; at the bottom, in particular, of the inn-garden. He had had other adventures before this; had kept along the height, after shaking off slumber; had admired, had almost coveted, another small old church, all steep roof and dim slate colour without and all whitewash and paper flowers within; had lost his way and had found it again; had conversed with rustics who struck him perhaps a little more as men of the world than he had expected; had acquired at a bound a fearless facility in French; had had, as the afternoon waned, a watery *bock*, all pale and Parisian, in the café of the furthest village, which was not the biggest; and had meanwhile not once overstepped the oblong gilt frame. The frame had drawn itself out for him, as much as you please; but that was just

his luck. He had finally come down again to the valley, to keep within touch of stations and trains, turning his face to the quarter from which he had started; and thus it was that he had at last pulled up before the hostess of the Cheval Blanc, who met him, with a rough readiness that was like the clatter of sabots over stones, on their common ground of a *côtelette de veau à l'oseille* and a subsequent lift. He had walked many miles and didn't know he was tired; but he still knew he was amused, and even that, though he had been alone all day, he had never yet so struck himself as engaged with others and in midstream of his drama. It might have passed for finished, his drama, with its catastrophe all but reached; it had, however, none the less been vivid again for him as he thus gave it its fullest chance. He had only had to be at last well out of it to feel it, oddly enough, still going on.

For this had been all day at bottom the spell of the picture—that it was essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage, that the very air of the play was in the rustle of the willows and the tone of the sky. The play and the characters had, without his knowing it till now, peopled all his space for him, and it seemed somehow quite happy that they should offer themselves, in the conditions so supplied, with a kind of inevitability. It was as if the conditions made them not only inevitable, but so much more nearly natural and right as that they were at least easier, pleasanter, to put up with. The conditions had nowhere so asserted their difference from those of Woollett as they appeared to him to assert it in the little court of the Cheval Blanc while he arranged with his hostess for a comfortable climax. They were few and simple, scant and humble, but they were *the thing*, as he would have called it, even to a greater degree than Madame de Vionnet's old high salon where the ghost of the Empire walked. 'The' thing was the thing that implied the greatest number of other things of the sort he had had to tackle; and it was queer of course, but so it was—the implication here was complete. Not a single one of his observations but somehow fell into a place in it; not a

breath of the cooler evening that wasn't somehow a syllable of the text. The text was simply, when condensed, that in *these* places such things were, and that if it was in them one elected to move about one had to make one's account with what one lighted on. Meanwhile at all events it was enough that they did affect one—so far as the village aspect was concerned—as whiteness, crookedness and blueness set in coppery green; there being positively, for that matter, an outer wall of the White Horse that was painted the most improbable shade. That was part of the amusement—as if to show that the fun was harmless; just as it was enough, further, that the picture and the play seemed supremely to melt together in the good woman's broad sketch of what she could do for her visitor's appetite. He felt in short a confidence, and it was general, and it was all he wanted to feel. It suffered no shock even on her mentioning that she had in fact just laid the cloth for two persons who, unlike Monsieur, had arrived by the river—in a boat of their own; who had asked her, half an hour before, what she could do for them, and had then paddled away to look at something a little further up—from which promenade they would presently return. Monsieur might meanwhile, if he liked, pass into the garden, such as it was, where she would serve him, should he wish it—for there were tables and benches in plenty—a 'bitter' before his repast. Here she would also report to him on the possibility of a conveyance to his station, and here at any rate he would have the *agrément* of the river.

It may be mentioned without delay that Monsieur had the *agrément* of everything, and in particular, for the next twenty minutes, of a small and primitive pavilion, that, at the garden's edge, almost overhung the water, testifying, in its somewhat battered state, to much fond frequentation. It consisted of little more than a platform, slightly raised, with a couple of benches and a table, a protecting rail and a projecting roof; but it raked the full grey-blue stream, which, taking a turn a short distance above, passed out of sight to reappear much higher up; and it was clearly in

esteemed requisition for Sundays and other feasts. Strether sat there and, though hungry, felt at peace; the confidence that had so gathered for him deepened with the lap of the water, the ripple of the surface, the rustle of the reeds on the opposite bank, the faint diffused coolness and the slight rock of a couple of small boats attached to a rough landing-place hard by. The valley on the further side was all copper-green level and glazed pearly sky, a sky hatched across with screens of trimmed trees, which looked flat, like espaliers; and though the rest of the village straggled away in the near quarter the view had an emptiness that made one of the boats suggestive. Such a river set one afloat almost before one could take up the oars—the idle play of which would be moreover the aid to the full impression. This perception went so far as to bring him to his feet; but that movement, in turn, made him feel afresh that he was tired, and while he leaned against a post and continued to look out he saw something that gave him a sharper arrest.

IV

WHAT HE saw was exactly the right thing—a boat advancing round the bend and containing a man who held the paddles and a lady, at the stern, with a pink parasol. It was suddenly as if these figures, or something like them, had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day, and had now drifted into sight, with the slow current, on purpose to fill up the measure. They came slowly, floating down, evidently directed to the landing-place near their spectator and presenting themselves to him not less clearly as the two persons for whom his hostess was already preparing a meal. For two very happy persons he found himself straightway taking them—a young man in shirt-sleeves, a young woman easy and fair, who had pulled pleasantly up from some other place and, being acquainted

with the neighbourhood, had known what this particular retreat could offer them. The air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations; the intimation that they were expert, familiar, frequent—that this wouldn't at all events be the first time. They knew how to do it, he vaguely felt—and it made them but the more idyllic, though at the very moment of the impression, as happened, their boat seemed to have begun to drift wide, the oarsman letting it go. It had by this time none the less come much nearer—near enough for Strether to dream the lady in the stern had for some reason taken account of his being there to watch them. She had remarked on it sharply, yet her companion hadn't turned round; it was in fact almost as if our friend had felt her bid him keep still. She had taken in something as a result of which their course had wavered, and it continued to waver while they just stood off. This little effect was sudden and rapid, so rapid that Strether's sense of it was separate only for an instant from a sharp start of his own. He too had within the minute taken in something, taken in that he knew the lady whose parasol, shifting as if to hide her face, made so fine a pink point in the shining scene. It was too prodigious, a chance in a million, but, if he knew the lady, the gentleman, who still presented his back and kept off, the gentleman, the coatless hero of the idyll, who had responded to her start, was, to match the marvel, none other than Chad.

Chad and Madame de Vionnet were then like himself taking a day in the country—though it was as queer as fiction, as farce, that their country could happen to be exactly his; and she had been the first at recognition, the first to feel, across the water, the shock—for it appeared to come to that—of their wonderful accident. Strether became aware, with this, of what was taking place—that her recognition had been even stranger for the pair in the boat, that her immediate impulse had been to control it, and that she was quickly and intensely debating with Chad the risk of betrayal. He saw they would show nothing if they could feel sure he hadn't made them out; so that he had before

him for a few seconds his own hesitation. It was a sharp fantastic crisis that had popped up as if in a dream, and it had had only to last the few seconds to make him feel it as quite horrible. They were thus, on either side, *trying* the other side, and all for some reason that broke the stillness like some unprovoked harsh note. It seemed to him again, within the limit, that he had but one thing to do—to settle their common question by some sign of surprise and joy. He hereupon gave large play to these things, agitating his hat and his stick and loudly calling out—a demonstration that brought him relief as soon as he had seen it answered. The boat, in midstream, still went a little wild—which seemed natural, however, while Chad turned round, half springing up; and his good friend, after blankness and wonder, began gaily to wave her parasol. Chad dropped afresh to his paddles and the boat headed round, amazement and pleasantry filling the air meanwhile, and relief, as Strether continued to fancy, superseding mere violence. Our friend went down to the water under this odd impression as of violence averted—the violence of their having 'cut' him, out there in the eye of nature, on the assumption that he wouldn't know it. He awaited them with a face from which he was conscious of not being able quite to banish this idea that they would have gone on, not seeing and not knowing, missing their dinner and disappointing their hostess, had he himself taken a line to match. That at least was what darkened his vision for the moment. Afterwards, after they had bumped at the landing-place and he had assisted their getting ashore, everything found itself sponged over by the mere miracle of the encounter.

They could so much better at last, on either side, treat it as a wild extravagance of hazard, that the situation was made elastic by the amount of explanation called into play. Why indeed—apart from oddity—the situation should have been really stiff was a question naturally not practical at the moment, and in fact, so far as we are concerned, a question tackled, later on and in private, only by Strether himself. He was to reflect later on and in private that it was mainly

he who had explained—as he had had moreover comparatively little difficulty in doing. He was to have at all events meanwhile the worrying thought of their perhaps secretly suspecting him of having plotted this coincidence, taking such pains as might be to give it the semblance of an accident. That possibility—as their imputation—didn't of course bear looking into for an instant; yet the whole incident was so manifestly, arrange it as they would, an awkward one, that he could scarce keep disclaimers in respect to his own presence from rising to his lips. Disclaimers of intention would have been as tactless as his presence was practically gross; and the narrowest escape they either of them had was his lucky escape, in the event, from making any. Nothing of the sort, so far as surface and sound were involved, was even in question; surface and sound all made for their common ridiculous good fortune, for the general *invraisemblance* of the occasion, for the charming chance that they had, the others, in passing, ordered some food to be ready, the charming chance that he had himself not eaten, the charming chance, even more, that their little plans, their hours, their train, in short, from *là-bas*, would all match for their return together to Paris. The chance that was most charming of all, the chance that drew from Madame de Vionnet her clearest, gayest '*Comme cela se trouve!*' was the announcement made to Strether after they were seated at table, the word given him by their hostess in respect to his carriage for the station, on which he might now count. It settled the matter for his friends as well; the conveyance—it *was* all too lucky!—would serve for them; and nothing was more delightful than his being in a position to make the train so definite. It might have been, for themselves—to hear Madame de Vionnet—almost unnaturally vague, a detail left to be fixed; though Strether indeed was afterwards to remember that Chad had promptly enough intervened to forestall this appearance, laughing at his companion's flightiness and making the point that he had, after all, in spite of the bedazzlement of a day out with her, known what he was about.

Strether was to remember afterwards further that this had had for him the effect of forming Chad's almost sole intervention; and indeed he was to remember further still, in subsequent meditation, many things that, as it were, fitted together. Another of them was for instance that the wonderful woman's overflow of surprise and amusement was wholly in French, which she struck him as speaking with an unprecedented command of idiomatic turns, but in which she got, as he might have said, somewhat away from him, taking all at once little brilliant jumps that he could but lamely match. The question of his own French had never come up for them; it was the one thing she wouldn't have permitted—it belonged, for a person who had been through much, to mere boredom; but the present result was odd, fairly veiling her identity, shifting her back into a mere voluble class or race to the intense audibility of which he was by this time inured. When she spoke the charming slightly strange English he best knew her by he seemed to feel her as a creature, among all the millions, with a language quite to herself, the real monopoly of a special shade of speech, beautifully easy for her, yet of a colour and a cadence that were both inimitable and matters of accident. She came back to these things after they had shaken down in the inn-parlour and knew, as it were, what was to become of them; it was inevitable that loud ejaculation over the prodigy of their convergence should at last wear itself out. Then it was that his impression took fuller form—the impression, destined only to deepen, to complete itself, that they had something to put a face upon, to carry off and make the best of, and that it was she who, admirably on the whole, was doing this. It was familiar to him of course that they had something to put a face upon; their friendship, their connexion, took any amount of explaining —that would have been made familiar by his twenty minutes with Mrs Pocock if it hadn't already been so. Yet his theory, as we know, had bountifully been that the facts were specifically none of his business, and were, over and above, so far as one had to do with them, intrinsically

beautiful; and this might have prepared him for anything, as well as rendered him proof against mystification. When he reached home that night, however, he knew he had been, at bottom, neither prepared nor proof; and since we have spoken of what he was, after his return, to recall and interpret, it may as well immediately be said that his real experience of these few hours put on, in that belated vision —for he scarce went to bed till morning—the aspect that is most to our purpose.

He then knew more or less how he had been affected—he but half knew at the time. There had been plenty to affect him even after, as has been said, they had shaken down; for his consciousness, though muffled, had its sharpest moments during this passage, a marked drop into innocent friendly Bohemia. They then had put their elbows on the table, deploring the premature end of their two or three dishes; which they had tried to make up with another bottle while Chad joked a little spasmodically, perhaps even a little irrelevantly, with the hostess. What it all came to had been that fiction and fable *were*, inevitably, in the air, and not as a simple term of comparison, but as a result of things said; also that they were blinking it, all round, and that they yet needn't, so much as that, have blinked it—though indeed if they hadn't Strether didn't quite see what else they could have done. Strether didn't quite see *that* even at an hour or two past midnight, even when he had, at his hotel, for a long time, without a light and without undressing, sat back on his bedroom sofa and stared straight before him. He was, at that point of vantage, in full possession, to make of it all what he could. He kept making of it that there had been simply a *lie* in the charming affair—a lie on which one could now, detached and deliberate, perfectly put one's finger. It was with the lie that they had eaten and drunk and talked and laughed, that they had waited for their *carriole* rather impatiently, and had then got into the vehicle and, sensibly subsiding, driven their three or four miles through the darkening summer night. The eating and drinking, which had been a resource, had

had the effect of having served its turn; the talk and laughter had done as much; and it was during their somewhat tedious progress to the station, during the waits there, the further delays, their submission to fatigue, their silences in the dim compartment of the much-stopping train, that he prepared himself for reflexions to come. It had been a performance, Madame de Vionnet's manner, and though it had to that degree faltered toward the end, as though her ceasing to believe in it, as if she had asked herself, or Chad had found a moment surreptitiously to ask her, what after all was the use, a performance it had none the less quite handsomely remained, with the final fact about it that it was on the whole easier to keep up than to abandon.

From the point of view of presence of mind it had been very wonderful indeed, wonderful for readiness, for beautiful assurance, for the way her decision was taken on the spot, without time to confer with Chad, without time for anything. Their only conference could have been the brief instants in the boat before they confessed to recognising the spectator on the bank, for they hadn't been alone together a moment since and must have communicated all in silence. It was a part of the deep impression for Strether, and not the least of the deep interest, that they *could* so communicate—that Chad in particular could let her know he left it to her. He habitually left things to others, as Strether was so well aware, and it in fact came over our friend in these meditations that there had been as yet no such vivid illustration of his famous knowing how to live. It was as if he had humoured her to the extent of letting her lie without correction—almost as if, really, he would be coming round in the morning to set the matter, as between Strether and himself, right. Of course he couldn't quite come; it was a case in which a man was obliged to accept the woman's version, even when fantastic; if she had, with more flurry than she cared to show, elected, as the phrase was, to represent that they had left Paris that morning, and with no design but of getting back within the day—if she had so sized-up, in the Woollett phrase, their necessity, she knew best her own

measure. There were things, all the same, it was impossible to blink and which made this measure an odd one—the too evident fact for instance that she hadn't started out for the day dressed and hatted and shod, and even, for that matter, pink parasol'd, as she had been in the boat. From what did the drop in her assurance proceed as the tension increased —from what did this slightly baffled ingenuity spring but from her consciousness of not presenting, as night closed in, with not so much as a shawl to wrap her round, an appearance that matched her story? She admitted that she was cold, but only to blame her imprudence, which Chad suffered her to give such account of as she might. Her shawl and Chad's overcoat and her other garments, and his, those they had each worn the day before, were at the place, best known to themselves—a quiet retreat enough, no doubt—at which they had been spending the twenty-four hours, to which they had fully meant to return that evening, from which they had so remarkably swum into Strether's ken, and the tacit repudiation of which had been thus the essence of her comedy. Strether saw how she had perceived in a flash that they couldn't quite look to going back there under his nose; though, honestly, as he gouged deeper into the matter, he was somewhat surprised, as Chad likewise had perhaps been, at the uprising of this scruple. He seemed even to divine that she had entertained it rather for Chad than for herself, and that, as the young man had lacked the chance to enlighten her, she had had to go on with it, he meanwhile mistaking her motive.

He was rather glad, none the less, that they had in point of fact not parted at the Cheval Blanc, that he hadn't been reduced to giving them his blessing for an idyllic retreat down the river. He had had in the actual case to make-believe more than he liked, but this was nothing, it struck him, to what the other event would have required. Could he, literally, quite have faced the other event? Would he have been capable of making the best of it with them? This was what he was trying to do now; but with the advantage of his being able to give more time to it a good deal

counteracted by his sense of what, over and above the central fact itself, he had to swallow. It was the quantity of make-believe involved and so vividly exemplified that most disagreed with his spiritual stomach. He moved, however, from the consideration of that quantity—to say nothing of the consciousness of that organ—back to the other feature of the show, the deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed. That was what, in his vain vigil, he oftenest reverted to: intimacy, at such a point, was *like* that—and what in the world else would one have wished it to be like? It was all very well for him to feel the pity of its being so much like lying; he almost blushed, in the dark, for the way he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a little girl might have dressed her doll. He had made them—and by no fault of their own—momentarily pull it for him, the possibility, out of this vagueness; and must he not therefore take it now as they had had simply, with whatever thin attenuations, to give it to him? The very question, it may be added, made him feel lonely and cold. There was the element of the awkward all round, but Chad and Madame de Vionnet had at least the comfort that they could talk it over together. With whom could *he* talk of such things?—unless indeed always, at almost any stage, with Maria? He foresaw that Miss Gostrey would come again into requisition on the morrow; though it wasn't to be denied that he was already a little afraid of her 'What on earth—that's what I want to know now—had you then supposed?' He recognised at last that he had really been trying all along to suppose nothing. Verily, verily, his labour had been lost. He found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things.

BOOK TWELFTH

I

STRETHER COULDN'T have said he had during the previous hours definitely expected it; yet when, later on, that morning—though no later indeed than for his coming forth at ten o'clock—he saw the concierge produce, on his approach, a *petit bleu* delivered since his letters had been sent up, he recognised the appearance as the first symptom of a sequel. He then knew he had been thinking of some early sign from Chad as more likely, after all, than not; and this would be precisely the early sign. He took it so for granted that he opened the *petit bleu* just where he had stopped, in the pleasant cool draught of the porte-cochère—only curious to see where the young man would, at such a juncture, break out. His curiosity, however, was more than gratified; the small missive, whose gummed edge he had detached without attention to the address, not being from the young man at all, but from the person whom the case gave him on the spot as still more worth while. Worth while or not, he went round to the nearest telegraph-office, the big one on the Boulevard, with a directness that almost confessed to a fear of the danger of delay. He might have been thinking that if he didn't go before he could think he wouldn't perhaps go at all. He at any rate kept, in the lower side-pocket of his morning coat, a very deliberate hand on his blue missive, crumpling it up rather tenderly than harshly. He wrote a reply, on the Boulevard, also in the form of a *petit bleu*—which was quickly done, under pressure of the place, inasmuch as, like Madame de Vionnet's own communication, it consisted of the fewest words. She had asked him if he could do her the very great kindness of coming to see her that evening at half-past nine, and he

answered, as if nothing were easier, that he would present himself at the hour she named. She had added a line of postscript, to the effect that she would come to him elsewhere and at his own hour if he preferred; but he took no notice of this, feeling that if he saw her at all half the value of it would be in seeing her where he had already seen her best. He mightn't see her at all; that was one of the reflexions he made after writing and before he dropped his closed card into the box; he mightn't see any one at all any more at all; he might make an end as well now as ever, leaving things as they were, since he was doubtless not to leave them better, and taking his way home so far as should appear that a home remained to him. The alternative was for a few minutes so sharp that if he at last did deposit his missive it was perhaps because the pressure of the place had an effect.

There was none other, however, than the common and constant pressure, familiar to our friend under the rubric of *Postes et Télégraphes*—the something in the air of these establishments; the vibration of the vast strange life of the town, the influence of the types, the performers concocting their messages; the little prompt Paris women, arranging, pretexting goodness knew what, driving the dreadful needle-pointed public pen at the dreadful sand-strewn public table: implements that symbolised for Strether's too interpretative innocence something more acute in manners, more sinister in morals, more fierce in the national life. After he had put in his paper he had ranged himself, he was really amused to think, on the side of the fierce, the sinister, the acute. He was carrying on a correspondence, across the great city, quite in the key of the *Postes et Télégraphes* in general; and it was fairly as if the acceptance of that fact had come from something in his state that sorted with the occupation of his neighbours. He was mixed up with the typical tale of Paris, and so were they, poor things—how could they altogether help being? They were no worse than he, in short, and he no worse than they—if, queerly enough, no better; and at all events he had settled his hash, so that he

went out to begin, from that moment, his day of waiting. The great settlement was, as he felt, in his preference for seeing his correspondent in her own best conditions. *That* was part of the typical tale, the part most significant in respect to himself. He liked the place she lived in, the picture that each time squared itself, large and high and clear, around her: every occasion of seeing it was a pleasure of a different shade. Yet what precisely was he doing with shades of pleasure now, and why hadn't he properly and logically compelled her to commit herself to whatever of disadvantage and penalty the situation might throw up? He might have proposed, as for Sarah Pocock, the cold hospitality of his own *salon de lecture*, in which the chill of Sarah's visit seemed still to abide and shades of pleasure were dim; he might have suggested a stone bench in the dusty Tuileries or a penny chair at the back part of the Champs Élysées. These things would have been a trifle stern, and sternness alone now wouldn't be sinister. An instinct in him cast about for some form of discipline in which they might meet—some awkwardness they would suffer from, some danger, or at least some grave inconvenience, they would incur. This would give a sense—which the spirit required, rather ached and sighed in the absence of—that somebody was paying something somewhere and somehow, that they were at least not all floating together on the silver stream of impunity. Just instead of that to go and see her late in the evening, as if, for all the world—well, as if he were as much in the swim as anybody else: this had as little as possible in common with the penal form.

Even when he had felt that objection melt away, however, the practical difference was small; the long stretch of his interval took the colour it would, and if he lived on thus with the sinister from hour to hour it proved an easier thing than one might have supposed in advance. He reverted in thought to his old tradition, the one he had been brought up on and which even so many years of life had but little worn away; the notion that the state of the wrongdoer, or at least this person's happiness, presented some special diffi-

culty. What struck him now rather was the ease of it—for nothing in truth appeared easier. It was an ease he himself fairly tasted of for the rest of the day; giving himself quite up; not so much as trying to dress it out, in any particular whatever, as a difficulty; not after all going to see Maria—which would have been in a manner a result of such dressing; only idling, lounging, smoking, sitting in the shade, drinking lemonade and consuming ices. The day had turned to heat and eventual thunder, and he now and again went back to his hotel to find that Chad hadn't been there. He hadn't yet struck himself, since leaving Woollett, so much as a loafer, though there had been times when he believed himself touching bottom. This was a deeper depth than any, and with no foresight, scarcely with a care, as to what he should bring up. He almost wondered if he didn't *look* demoralised and disreputable; he had the fanciful vision, as he sat and smoked, of some accidental, some motived, return of the Pococks, who would be passing along the Boulevard and would catch this view of him. They would have distinctly, on his appearance, every ground for scandal. But fate failed to administer even that sternness; the Pococks never passed and Chad made no sign. Strether meanwhile continued to hold off from Miss Gostrey, keeping her till to-morrow; so that by evening his irresponsibility, his impunity, his luxury, had become—there was no other word for them—immense.

Between nine and ten, at last, in the high clear picture—he was moving in these days, as in a gallery, from clever canvas to clever canvas—he drew a long breath: it was so presented to him from the first that the spell of his luxury wouldn't be broken. He wouldn't have, that is, to become responsible—this was admirably in the air: she had sent for him precisely to let him feel it, so that he might go on with the comfort (comfort already established, hadn't it been?) of regarding his ordeal, the ordeal of the weeks of Sarah's stay and of their climax, as safely traversed and left behind him. Didn't she just wish to assure him that *she* now took it all and so kept it; that he was absolutely not to worry any

more, was only to rest on his laurels and continue generously to help her? The light in her beautiful, formal room was dim, though it would do, as everything would always do; the hot night had kept out lamps, but there was a pair of clusters of candles that glimmered over the chimney-piece like the tall tapers of an altar. The windows were all open, their redundant hangings swaying a little, and he heard once more, from the empty court, the small plash of the fountain. From beyond this, and as from a great distance—beyond the court, beyond the *corps de logis* forming the front—came, as if excited and exciting, the vague voice of Paris. Strether had all along been subject to sudden gusts of fancy in connexion with such matters as these—odd starts of the historic sense, suppositions and divinations with no warrant but their intensity. Thus and so, on the eve of the great recorded dates, the days and nights of revolution, the sounds had come in, the omens, the beginnings broken out. They were the smell of revolution, the smell of the public temper—or perhaps simply the smell of blood.

It was at present queer beyond words, 'subtle', he would have risked saying, that such suggestions should keep crossing the scene; but it was doubtless the effect of the thunder in the air, which had hung about all day without release. His hostess was dressed as for thunderous times, and it fell in with the kind of imagination we have just attributed to him that she should be in simplest coolest white, of a character so old-fashioned, if he were not mistaken, that Madame Roland must on the scaffold have worn something like it. This effect was enhanced by a small black fichu or scarf, of crape or gauze, disposed quaintly round her bosom and now completing as by a mystic touch the pathetic, the noble analogy. Poor Strether in fact scarce knew what analogy was evoked for him as the charming woman, receiving him and making him, as she could do such things, at once familiarly and gravely welcome, moved over her great room with her image almost repeated in its polished floor, which had been fully bared for summer. The

associations of the place, all felt again; the gleam here and there, in the subdued light, of glass and gilt and parquet, with the quietness of her own note as the centre—these things were at first as delicate as if they had been ghostly, and he was sure in a moment that, whatever he should find he had come for, it wouldn't be for an impression that had previously failed him. That conviction held him from the outset, and, seeming singularly to simplify, certified to him that the objects about would help him, would really help them both. No, he might never see them again—this was only too probably the last time; and he should certainly see nothing in the least degree like them. He should soon be going to where such things were not, and it would be a small mercy for memory, for fancy, to have, in that stress, a loaf on the shelf. He knew in advance he should look back on the perception actually sharpest with him as on the view of something old, old, old, the oldest thing he had ever personally touched; and he also knew, even while he took his companion in as the feature among features, that memory and fancy couldn't help being enlisted for her. She might intend what she would, but this was beyond anything she could intend, with things from far back—tyrannies of history, facts of type, values, as the painters said, of expression—all working for her and giving her the supreme chance of the happy, the really luxurious few, the chance, on a great occasion, to be natural and simple. She had never, with him, been more so; or if it was the perfection of art it would never—and that came to the same thing—be proved against her.

What was truly wonderful was her way of differing so from time to time without detriment to her simplicity. Caprices, he was sure she felt, were before anything else bad manners, and that judgment in her was by itself a thing making more for safety of intercourse than anything that in his various own past intercourses he had had to reckon on. If therefore her presence was now quite other than the one she had shown him the night before, there

was nothing of violence in the change—it was all harmony and reason. It gave him a mild deep person, whereas he had had on the occasion to which their interview was a direct reference a person committed to movement and surface and abounding in them; but she was in either character more remarkable for nothing than for her bridging of intervals, and this now fell in with what he understood he was to leave to her. The only thing was that, if he was to leave it *all* to her, why exactly had she sent for him? He had had, vaguely, in advance, his explanation, his view of the probability of her wishing to set something right, to deal in some way with the fraud so lately practised on his presumed credulity. Would she attempt to carry it further or would she blot it out? Would she throw over it some more or less happy colour; or would she do nothing about it at all? He perceived soon enough at least that, however reasonable she might be, she wasn't vulgarly confused, and it herewith pressed upon him that their eminent 'lie', Chad's and hers, was simply after all such an inevitable tribute to good taste as he couldn't have wished them not to render. Away from them, during his vigil, he had seemed to wince at the amount of comedy involved; whereas in his present posture he could only ask himself how he should enjoy any attempt from her to take the comedy back. He shouldn't enjoy it at all; but, once more and yet once more, he could trust her. That is he could trust her to make deception right. As she presented things the ugliness—goodness knew why—went out of them; none the less too that she could present them, with an art of her own, by not so much as touching them. She let the matter, at all events, lie where it was—where the previous twenty-four hours had placed it; appearing merely to circle about it respectfully, tenderly, almost piously, while she took up another question.

She knew she hadn't really thrown dust in his eyes; this, the previous night, before they separated, had practically passed between them; and, as she had sent for him to see what the difference thus made for him might amount to,

so he was conscious at the end of five minutes that he had been tried and tested. She had settled with Chad after he left them that she would, for her satisfaction, assure herself of this quantity, and Chad had, as usual, let her have her way. Chad was always letting people have their way when he felt that it would somehow turn his wheel for him; it somehow always did turn his wheel. Strether felt, oddly enough, before these facts, freshly and consentingly passive; they again so rubbed it into him that the couple thus fixing his attention were intimate, that his intervention had absolutely aided and intensified their intimacy, and that in fine he must accept the consequence of that. He had absolutely become, himself, with his perceptions and his mistakes, his concessions and his reserves, the droll mixture, as it must seem to them, of his braveries and his fears, the general spectacle of his art and his innocence, almost an added link and certainly a common priceless ground for them to meet upon. It was as if he had been hearing their very tone when she brought out a reference that was comparatively straight. 'The last twice that you've been here, you know, I never asked you,' she said with an abrupt transition—they had been pretending before this to talk simply of the charm of yesterday and of the interest of the country they had seen. The effort was confessedly vain; not for such talk had she invited him; and her impatient reminder was of their having done for it all the needful on his coming to her after Sarah's flight. What she hadn't asked him then was to state to her where and how he stood for her: she had been resting on Chad's report of their midnight hour together in the Boulevard Malesherbes. The thing therefore she at present desired was ushered in by this recall of the two occasions on which, disinterested and merciful, she hadn't worried him. To-night truly she *would* worry him, and this was her appeal to him to let her risk it. He wasn't to mind if she bored him a little: she had behaved, after all—hadn't she? —so awfully, awfully well.

II

'OH, YOU'RE all right, you're all right,' he almost impatiently declared; his impatience being moreover not for her pressure, but for her scruple. More and more distinct to him was the tune to which she would have had the matter out with Chad; more and more vivid for him the idea that she had been nervous as to what he might be able to 'stand'. Yes, it had been a question if he had 'stood' what the scene on the river had given him, and, though the young man had doubtless opined in favour of his recuperation, her own last word must have been that she should feel easier in seeing for herself. That was it, unmistakably; she *was* seeing for herself. What he could stand was thus, in these moments, in the balance for Strether, who reflected, as he became fully aware of it, that he must properly brace himself. He wanted fully to appear to stand all he might; and there was a certain command of the situation for him in this very wish not to look too much to sea. She was ready with everything, but so, sufficiently, was he; that is he was at one point the more prepared of the two—inasmuch as, for all her cleverness, she couldn't produce on the spot—and it was surprising—an account of the motive of her note. He had the advantage that his pronouncing her 'all right' gave him for an inquiry. 'May I ask, delighted as I've been to come, if you've wished to say something special?' He spoke as if she might have seen he had been waiting for it—not indeed with discomfort, but with natural interest. Then he saw that she was a little taken aback, was even surprised herself at the detail she had neglected—the only one ever yet; having somehow assumed he would know, would recognise, would leave some things not to be said. She looked at him, however, an instant as if to convey that if he wanted them *all*——!

'Selfish and vulgar—that's what I must seem to you. You've done everything for me, and here I am as if I were

asking for more. But it isn't,' she went on, 'because I'm afraid—though I *am* of course afraid, as a woman in my position always is. I mean it isn't because one lives in terror —it isn't because of that one is selfish, for I'm ready to give you my word to-night that I don't care; don't care what still may happen and what I may lose. I don't ask you to raise your little finger for me again, nor do I wish so much as to mention to you what we've talked of before, either my danger or my safety, or his mother, or his sister, or the girl he may marry, or the fortune he may make or miss, or the right or the wrong, of any kind, he may do. If after the help one has had from you one can't either take care of one's self or simply hold one's tongue, one must renounce all claim to be an object of interest. It's in the name of what I *do* care about that I've tried still to keep hold of you. How can I be indifferent,' she asked, 'to how I appear to you?' And as he found himself unable immediately to say: 'Why, if you're going, *need* you, after all? Is it impossible you should stay on—so that one mayn't lose you?'

'Impossible I should live with you here instead of going home?'

'Not "with" us, if you object to that, but near enough to us, somewhere, for us to see you—well,' she beautifully brought out, 'when we feel we *must*. How shall we not sometimes feel it? I've wanted to see you often when I couldn't,' she pursued, 'all these last weeks. How shan't I then miss you now, with the sense of your being gone for ever?' Then as if the straightness of this appeal, taking him unprepared, had visibly left him wondering: 'Where *is* your "home" moreover now—what has become of it? I've made a change in your life, I know I have; I've upset everything in your mind as well; in your sense of—what shall I call it?—all the decencies and possibilities. It gives me a kind of detestation——' She pulled up short.

Oh but he wanted to hear. 'Detestation of what?'

'Of everything—of life.'

'Ah that's too much,' he laughed—'or too little!'

'Too little, precisely'—she was eager. 'What I hate is myself—when I think that one has to take so much, to be happy, out of the lives of others, and that one isn't happy even then. One does it to cheat one's self and to stop one's mouth—but that's only at the best for a little. The wretched self is always there, always making one somehow a fresh anxiety. What it comes to is that it's not, that it's never, a happiness, any happiness at all, to *take*. The only safe thing is to give. It's what plays you least false.' Interesting, touching, strikingly sincere as she let these things come from her, she yet puzzled and troubled him—so fine was the quaver of her quietness. He felt what he had felt before with her, that there was always more behind what she showed, and more and more again behind that. 'You know so, at least,' she added, 'where you are!'

'*You* ought to know it indeed then; for isn't what you've been giving exactly what has brought us together this way? You've been making, as I've so fully let you know I've felt,' Strether said, 'the most precious present I've ever seen made, and if you can't sit down peacefully on that performance you *are*, no doubt, born to torment yourself. But you ought,' he wound up, 'to be easy.'

'And not trouble you any more, no doubt—not thrust on you even the wonder and the beauty of what I've done; only let you regard our business as over, and well over, and see you depart in a peace that matches my own! No doubt, no doubt,' she nervously repeated—'all the more that I don't really pretend I believe you couldn't, for yourself, *not* have done what you have. I don't pretend you feel yourself victimised, for this evidently is the way you live, and it's what—we're agreed—is the best way. Yes, as you say,' she continued after a moment, 'I ought to be easy and rest on my work. Well then here I am doing so. I *am* easy. You'll have it for your last impression. When is it you say you go?' she asked with a quick change.

He took some time to reply—his last impression was more and more so mixed a one. It produced in him a vague disappointment, a drop that was deeper even than the fall

of his elation the previous night. The good of what he had done, if he had done so much, wasn't there to enliven him quite to the point that would have been ideal for a grand gay finale. Women were thus endlessly absorbent, and to deal with them was to walk on water. What was at bottom the matter with her, embroider as she might and disclaim as she might—what was at bottom the matter with her was simply Chad himself. It was of Chad she was after all renewedly afraid; the strange strength of her passion was the very strength of her fear; she clung to *him*, Lambert Strether, as to a source of safety she had tested, and, generous graceful truthful as she might try to be, exquisite as she was, she dreaded the term of his being within reach. With this sharpest perception yet, it was like a chill in the air to him, it was almost appalling, that a creature so fine could be, by mysterious forces, a creature so exploited. For at the end of all things they *were* mysterious: she had but made Chad what he was—so why could she think she had made him infinite? She had made him better, she had made him best, she had made him anything one would; but it came to our friend with supreme queerness that he was none the less only Chad. Strether had the sense that *he*, a little, had made him too; his high appreciation had, as it were, consecrated her work. The work, however admirable, was nevertheless of the strict human order, and in short it was marvellous that the companion of mere earthly joys, of comforts, aberrations (however one classed them) within the common experience, should be so transcendently prized. It might have made Strether hot or shy, as such secrets of others brought home sometimes do make us; but he was held there by something so hard that it was fairly grim. This was not the discomposure of last night; that had quite passed—such discomposures were a detail; the real coercion was to see a man ineffably adored. There it was again—it took women, it took women; if to deal with them was to walk on water, what wonder that the water rose? And it had never surely risen higher than round this woman. He presently found himself taking a long look from her, and

the next thing he knew he had uttered all his thought. 'You're afraid for your life!'

It drew out her long look, and he soon enough saw why. A spasm came into her face, the tears she had already been unable to hide overflowed at first in silence, and then, as the sound suddenly comes from a child, quickened to gasps, to sobs. She sat and covered her face with her hands, giving up all attempts at a manner. 'It's how you see me, it's how you see me'—she caught her breath with it—'and it's as I *am*, and as I must take myself, and of course it's no matter.' Her emotion was at first so incoherent that he could only stand there at a loss, stand with his sense of having upset her, though of having done it by the truth. He had to listen to her in a silence that he made no immediate effort to attenuate, feeling her doubly woeful amid all her dim diffused elegance; consenting to it as he had consented to the rest, and even conscious of some vague inward irony in the presence of such a fine free range of bliss and bale. He couldn't say it was *not* no matter; for he was serving her to the end, he now knew, anyway—quite as if what he thought of her had nothing to do with it. It was actually moreover as if he didn't think of her at all, as if he could think of nothing but the passion, mature, abysmal, pitiful, she represented, and the possibilities she betrayed. She was older for him to-night, visibly less exempt from the touch of time; but she was as much as ever the finest and subtlest creature, the happiest apparition, it had been given him, in all his years, to meet; and yet he could see her there as vulgarly troubled, in very truth, as a maidservant crying for her young man. The only thing was that she judged herself as the maidservant wouldn't; the weakness of which wisdom too, the dishonour of which judgment, seemed but to sink her lower. Her collapse, however, no doubt, was briefer and she had in a manner recovered herself before he intervened. 'Of course I'm afraid for my life. But that's nothing. It isn't that.'

He was silent a little while longer, as if thinking what it

might be. 'There's something I have in mind that I can still do.'

But she threw off at last, with a sharp sad headshake, drying her eyes, what he could still do. 'I don't care for that. Of course, as I've said, you're acting, in your wonderful way, for yourself; and what's for yourself is no more my business—though I may reach out unholy hands so clumsily to touch it—than if it were something in Timbuctoo. It's only that you don't snub me, as you've had fifty chances to do—it's only your beautiful patience that makes one forget one's manners. In spite of your patience, all the same,' she went on, 'you'd do anything rather than be with us here, even if that were possible. You'd do everything for us but be mixed up with us—which is a statement you can easily answer to the advantage of your own manners. You can say "What's the use of talking of things that at the best are impossible?" What *is*, of course, the use? It's only my little madness. You'd talk if you were tormented. And I don't mean now about *him*. Oh for him——!' Positively, strangely, bitterly, as it seemed to Strether, she gave 'him', for the moment, away. 'You don't care what I think of you; but I happen to care what you think of me. And what you *might*,' she added. 'What you perhaps even did.'

He gained time. 'What I did——?'

'Did think before. Before this. *Didn't* you think——?'

But he had already stopped her. 'I didn't think anything. I never think a step further than I'm obliged to.'

'That's perfectly false, I believe,' she returned—'except that you may, no doubt, often pull up when things become *too* ugly; or even, I'll say, to save you a protest, too beautiful. At any rate, even so far as it's true, we've thrust on you appearances that you've had to take in and that have therefore made your obligation. Ugly or beautiful—it doesn't matter what we call them—you were getting on without them, and that's where we're detestable. We bore you—that's where we are. And we may well—for what we've cost you. All you can do *now* is not to think at all. And I who should have liked to seem to you—well, sublime!'

He could only after a moment, re-echo Miss Barrace. 'You're wonderful!'

'I'm old and abject and hideous'—she went on as without hearing him. 'Abject above all. Or old above all. It's when one's old that it's worst. I don't care what becomes of it—let what *will*; there it is. It's a doom—I know it; you can't see it more than I do myself. Things have to happen as they will.' With which she came back again to what, face to face with him, had so quite broken down. 'Of course you wouldn't, even if possible, and no matter what may happen to you, be near us. But think of me, think of me——!' She exhaled it into air.

He took refuge in repeating something he had already said and that she had made nothing of. 'There's something I believe I can still do.' And he put out his hand for good-bye.

She again made nothing of it; she went on with her insistence. 'That won't help you. There's nothing to help you.'

'Well, it may help *you*,' he said.

She shook her head. 'There's not a grain of certainty in my future—for the only certainty is that I shall be the loser in the end.'

She hadn't taken his hand, but she moved with him to the door. 'That's cheerful,' he laughed, 'for your benefactor!'

'What's cheerful for *me*,' she replied, 'is that we might, you and I, have been friends. That's it—that's it. You see how, as I say, I want everything. I've wanted you too.'

'Ah but you've *had* me!' he declared, at the door, with an emphasis that made an end.

III

HIS PURPOSE had been to see Chad the next day, and he had prefigured seeing him by an early call; having in general

never stood on ceremony in respect to visits in the Boulevard Malesherbes. It had been more often natural for him to go there than for Chad to come to the small hotel, the attractions of which were scant; yet it nevertheless, just now, at the eleventh hour, did suggest itself to Strether to begin by giving the young man a chance. It struck him that, in the inevitable course, Chad would be 'round', as Waymarsh used to say—Waymarsh who already, somehow, seemed long ago. He hadn't come the day before, because it had been arranged between them that Madame de Vionnet should see their friend first; but now that this passage had taken place he would present himself, and their friend wouldn't have long to wait. Strether assumed, he became aware, on this reasoning, that the interesting parties to the arrangement would have met betimes, and that the more interesting of the two—as she was after all—would have communicated to the other the issue of her appeal. Chad would know without delay that his mother's messenger had been with her, and, though it was perhaps not quite easy to see how she could qualify what had occurred, he would at least have been sufficiently advised to feel he could go on. The day, however, brought, early or late, no word from him, and Strether felt, as a result of this, that a change had practically come over their intercourse. It was perhaps a premature judgment; or it only meant perhaps—how could he tell?—that the wonderful pair he protected had taken up again together the excursion he had accidentally checked. They might have gone back to the country, and gone back but with a long breath drawn; that indeed would best mark Chad's sense that reprobation hadn't rewarded Madame de Vionnet's request for an interview. At the end of the twenty-four hours, at the end of the forty-eight, there was still no overture; so that Strether filled up the time, as he had so often filled it before, by going to see Miss Gostrey.

He proposed amusements to her; he felt expert now in proposing amusements; and he had thus, for several days, an odd sense of leading her about Paris, of driving her in the Bois, of showing her the penny steamboats—those from

which the breeze of the Seine was to be best enjoyed—that might have belonged to a kindly uncle doing the honours of the capital to an intelligent niece from the country. He found means even to take her to shops she didn't know, or that she pretended she didn't; while she, on her side, was, like the country maiden, all passive modest and grateful—going in fact so far as to emulate rusticity in occasional fatigues and bewilderments. Strether described these vague proceedings to himself, described them even to her, as a happy interlude; the sign of which was that the companions said for the time no further word about the matter they had talked of to satiety. He proclaimed satiety at the outset, and she quickly took the hint; as docile both in this and in everything else as the intelligent obedient niece. He told her as yet nothing of his late adventure—for as an adventure it now ranked with him; he pushed the whole business temporarily aside and found his interest in the fact of her beautiful assent. She left questions unasked—she who for so long had been all questions; she gave herself up to him with an understanding of which mere mute gentleness might have seemed the sufficient expression. She knew his sense of his situation had taken still another step—of that he was quite aware; but she conveyed that, whatever had thus happened for him, it was thrown into the shade by what was happening for herself. This—though it mightn't to a detached spirit have seemed much—was the major interest, and she met it with a new directness of response, measuring it from hour to hour with her grave hush of acceptance. Touched as he had so often been by her before, he was, for his part too, touched afresh; all the more that though he could be duly aware of the principle of his own mood he couldn't be equally so of the principle of hers. He knew, that is, in a manner—knew roughly and resignedly—what he himself was hatching; whereas he had to take the chance of what he called to himself Maria's calculations. It was all he needed that she liked him enough for what they were doing, and even should they do a good deal more would still like him enough for that; the essential freshness of a

relation so simple was a cool bath to the soreness produced by other relations. These others appeared to him now horribly complex; they bristled with fine points, points all unimaginable beforehand, points that pricked and drew blood; a fact that gave to an hour with his present friend on a *bateau-mouche*, or in the afternoon shade of the Champs Elysées, something of the innocent pleasure of handling rounded ivory. His relation with Chad personally —from the moment he had got his point of view—had been of the simplest; yet this also struck him as bristling, after a third and a fourth blank day had passed. It was as if at last however his care for such indications had dropped; there came a fifth blank day and he ceased to inquire or to heed.

They now took on to his fancy, Miss Gostrey and he, the image of the Babes in the Wood; they could trust the merciful elements to let them continue at peace. He had been great already, as he knew, at postponements; but he had only to get afresh into the rhythm of one to feel its fine attraction. It amused him to say to himself that he might for all the world have been going to die—die resignedly; the scene was filled for him with so deep a death-bed hush, so melancholy a charm. That meant the postponement of everything else—which made so for the quiet lapse of life; and the postponement in especial of the reckoning to come —unless indeed the reckoning to come were to be one and the same thing with extinction. It faced him, the reckoning, over the shoulder of much interposing experience—which also faced him; and one would float to it doubtless duly through these caverns of Kubla Khan. It was really behind everything; it hadn't merged in what he had done; his final appreciation of what he had done—his appreciation on the spot—would provide it with its main sharpness. The spot so focused was of course Woollett, and he was to see, at the best, what Woollett would be with everything there changed for him. Wouldn't *that* revelation practically amount to the wind-up of his career? Well, the summer's end would show; his suspense had meanwhile exactly the sweetness of vain delay; and he had with it, we should mention, other

pastimes than Maria's company—plenty of separate musings in which his luxury failed him but at one point. He was well in port, the outer sea behind him, and it was only a matter of getting ashore. There was a question that came and went for him, however, as he rested against the side of his ship, and it was a little to get rid of the obsession that he prolonged his hours with Miss Gostrey. It was a question about himself, but it could only be settled by seeing Chad again; it was indeed his principal reason for wanting to see Chad. After that it wouldn't signify—it was a ghost that certain words would easily lay to rest. Only the young man must be there to take the words. Once they were taken he wouldn't have a question left; none, that is, in connexion with this particular affair. It wouldn't then matter even to himself that he might now have been guilty of speaking *because* of what he had forfeited. That was the refinement of his supreme scruple—he wished so to leave what he had forfeited out of account. He wished not to do anything because he had missed something else, because he was sore or sorry or impoverished, because he was maltreated or desperate; he wished to do everything because he was lucid and quiet, just the same for himself on all essential points as he had ever been. Thus it was that while he virtually hung about for Chad he kept mutely putting it: 'You've been chucked, old boy; but what has that to do with it?' It would have sickened him to feel vindictive.

These tints of feeling indeed were doubtless but the iridescence of his idleness, and they were presently lost in new light from Maria. She had a fresh fact for him before the week was out, and she practically met him with it on his appearing one night. He hadn't on this day seen her, but had planned presenting himself in due course to ask her to dine with him somewhere out of doors, on one of the terraces, in one of the gardens, of which the Paris of summer was profuse. It had then come on to rain, so that, disconcerted, he changed his mind; dining alone at home, a little stuffily and stupidly, and waiting on her afterwards to make up his loss. He was sure within a minute that something

had happened; it was so in the air of the rich little room that he had scarcely to name his thought. Softly lighted, the whole colour of the place, with its vague values, was in cool fusion—an effect that made the visitor stand for a little agaze. It was as if in doing so now he had felt a recent presence—his recognition of the passage of which his hostess in turn divined. She had scarcely to say it—'Yes, she has been here, and this time I received her.' It wasn't till a minute later that she added: 'There being, as I understand you, no reason *now*——!'

'None for your refusing?'

'No—if you've done what you've had to do.'

'I've certainly so far done it,' Strether said, 'as that you needn't fear the effect, or the appearance of coming between us. There's nothing between us now but what we ourselves have put there, and not an inch of room for anything else whatever. Therefore you're only beautifully *with* us as always—though doubtless now, if she has talked to you, rather more with us than less. Of course if she came,' he added, 'it was to talk to you.'

'It was to talk to me,' Maria returned; on which he was further sure that she was practically in possession of what he himself hadn't yet told her. He was even sure she was in possession of things he himself couldn't have told; for the consciousness of them was now all in her face and accompanied there with a shade of sadness that marked in her the close of all uncertainties. It came out for him more than ever yet that she had had from the first a knowledge she believed him not to have had, a knowledge the sharp acquisition of which might be destined to make a difference for him. The difference for him might not inconceivably be an arrest of his independence and a change in his attitude—in other words a revulsion in favour of the principles of Woollett. She had really prefigured the possibility of a shock that would send him swinging back to Mrs Newsome. He hadn't, it was true, week after week, shown signs of receiving it, but the possibility had been none the less in the air. What Maria accordingly had had now to take in was

that the shock had descended and that he hadn't, all the same, swung back. He had grown clear, in a flash, on a point long since settled for himself; but no reapproximation to Mrs Newsome had occurred in consequence. Madame de Vionnet had by her visit held up the torch to these truths, and what now lingered in poor Maria's face was the somewhat smoky light of the scene between them. If the light however wasn't, as we have hinted, the glow of joy, the reasons for this also were perhaps discernible to Strether even through the blur cast over them by his natural modesty. She had held herself for months with a firm hand; she hadn't interfered on any chance—and chances were specious enough—that she might interfere to her profit. She had turned her back on the dream that Mrs Newsome's rupture, their friend's forfeiture—the engagement, the relation itself, broken beyond all mending—might furnish forth her advantage; and, to stay her hand from promoting these things, she had, on private, difficult, but rigid, lines, played strictly fair. She couldn't therefore but feel that, though, as the end of all, the facts in question had been stoutly confirmed, her ground for personal, for what might have been called interested, elation remained rather vague. Strether might easily have made out that she had been asking herself, in the hours she had just sat through, if there were still for her, or were only not, a fair shade of uncertainty. Let us hasten to add, however, that what he at first made out on this occasion he also at first kept to himself. He only asked what in particular Madame de Vionnet had come for; and as to this his companion was ready.

'She wants tidings of Mr Newsome, whom she appears not to have seen for some days.'

'Then she hasn't been away with him again?'

'She seemed to think,' Maria answered, 'that he might have gone away with *you*.'

'And did you tell her I know nothing of him?'

She had her indulgent headshake. 'I've known nothing of what you know. I could only tell her I'd ask you.'

'Then I've not seen him for a week—and of course I've

wondered.' His wonderment showed at this moment as sharper, but he presently went on. 'Still, I dare say I can put my hand on him. Did she strike you,' he asked, 'as anxious?'

'She's always anxious.'

'After all I've done for her?' And he had one of the last flickers of his occasional mild mirth. 'To think that that was just what I came out to prevent!'

She took it up but to reply. 'You don't regard him then as safe?'

'I was just going to ask you how in that respect you regard Madame de Vionnet.'

She looked at him a little. 'What woman was *ever* safe? She told me,' she added—and it was as if at the touch of the connexion—'of your extraordinary meeting in the country. After that *à quoi se fier?*'

'It was, as an accident, in all the possible or impossible chapter,' Strether conceded, 'amazing enough. But still, but still——!'

'But still she didn't mind?'

'She doesn't mind anything.'

'Well, then, as you don't either, we may all sink to rest!'

He appeared to agree with her, but he had his reservation. 'I do mind Chad's disappearance.'

'Oh you'll get him back. But now you know,' she said, 'why I went to Mentone.' He had sufficiently let her see that he had by this time gathered things together, but there was nature in her wish to make them clearer still. 'I didn't want you to put it to me.'

'To put it to you——?'

'The question of what you were at last—a week ago—to see for yourself. I didn't want to have to lie for her. I felt that to be too much for me. A man of course is always expected to do it—to do it, I mean, for a woman; but not a woman for another woman; unless perhaps on the tit-for-tat principle, as an indirect way of protecting herself. I don't need protection, so that I was free to "funk" you—simply to dodge your test. The responsibility was too much for me.

I gained time, and when I came back the need of a test had blown over.'

Strether thought of it serenely. 'Yes; when you came back little Bilham had shown me what's expected of a gentleman. Little Bilham had lied like one.'

'And like what you believed him?'

'Well,' said Strether, 'it was but a technical lie—he classed the attachment as virtuous. That was a view for which there was much to be said—and the virtue came out for me hugely. There was of course a great deal of it. I got it full in the face, and I haven't, you see, done with it yet.'

'What I see, what I saw,' Maria returned, 'is that you dressed up even the virtue. You were wonderful—you were beautiful, as I've had the honour of telling you before; but, if you wish really to know,' she sadly confessed, 'I never quite knew *where* you were. There were moments,' she explained, 'when you struck me as grandly cynical; there were others when you struck me as grandly vague.'

Her friend considered. 'I had phases. I had flights.'

'Yes, but things must have a basis.'

'A basis seemed to me just what her beauty supplied.'

'Her beauty of person?'

'Well, her beauty of everything. The impression she makes. She has such variety and yet such harmony.'

She considered him with one of her deep returns of indulgence—returns out of all proportion to the irritations they flooded over. 'You're complete.'

'You're always too personal,' he good-humouredly said; 'but that's precisely how I wondered and wandered.'

'If you mean,' she went on, 'that she was from the first for you the most charming woman in the world, nothing's more simple. Only that was an odd foundation.'

'For what I reared on it?'

'For what you didn't!'

'Well, it was all not a fixed quantity. And it had for me—it has still—such elements of strangeness. Her greater age than his, her different world, traditions, associations; her other opportunities, liabilities, standards.'

His friend listened with respect to his enumeration of these disparities; then she disposed of them at a stroke. 'Those things are nothing when a woman's hit. It's very awful. She was hit.'

Strether, on his side, did justice to that plea. 'Oh of course I saw she was hit. That she was hit was what we were busy with; that she was hit was our great affair. But somehow I couldn't think of her as down in the dust. And as put there by *our* little Chad!'

'Yet wasn't "your" little Chad just your miracle?'

Strether admitted it. 'Of course I moved among miracles. It was all phantasmagoric. But the great fact was that so much of it was none of my business—as I saw my business. It isn't even now.'

His companion turned away on this, and it might well have been yet again with the sharpness of a fear of how little his philosophy could bring her personally. 'I wish *she* could hear you!'

'Mrs Newsome?'

'No—not Mrs Newsome; since I understand you that it doesn't matter now what Mrs Newsome hears. Hasn't she heard everything?'

'Practically—yes.' He had thought a moment, but he went on. 'You wish Madame de Vionnet could hear me?'

'Madame de Vionnet.' She had come back to him. 'She thinks just the contrary of what you say. That you distinctly judge her.'

He turned over the scene as the two women thus placed together for him seemed to give it. 'She might have known——!'

'Might have known you don't?' Miss Gostrey asked as he let it drop. 'She was sure of it at first,' she pursued as he said nothing; 'she took it for granted, at least, as any woman in her position would. But after that she changed her mind; she believed you believed——'

'Well?'—he was curious.

'Why in her sublimity. And that belief had remained with

her, I make out, till the accident of the other day opened your eyes. For that it did,' said Maria, 'open them——'

'She can't help'—he had taken it up—'being aware? No,' he mused; 'I suppose she thinks of that even yet.'

'Then they *were* closed? There you are! However, if you see her as the most charming woman in the world it comes to the same thing. And if you'd like me to tell her that you do still so see her——!' Miss Gostrey, in short, offered herself for service to the end.

It was an offer he could temporarily entertain; but he decided. 'She knows perfectly how I see her.'

'Not favourably enough, she mentioned to me, to wish ever to see her again. She told me you had taken a final leave of her. She says you've done with her.'

'So I have.'

Maria had a pause; then she spoke as if for conscience. 'She wouldn't have done with *you*. She feels she has lost you—yet that she might have been better for you.'

'Oh she has been quite good enough!' Strether laughed.

'She thinks you and she might at any rate have been friends.'

'We might certainly. That's just'—he continued to laugh —why I'm going.'

It was as if Maria could feel with this then at last that she had done her best for each. But she had still an idea. 'Shall I tell her that?'

'No. Tell her nothing.'

'Very well then.' To which in the next breath Miss Gostrey added: 'Poor dear thing!'

Her friend wondered; then with raised eyebrows: 'Me?'

'Oh no. Marie de Vionnet.'

He accepted the correction, but he wondered still. 'Are you so sorry for her as that?'

It made her think a moment—made her even speak with a smile. But she didn't really retract. 'I'm sorry for us all!'

IV

HE WAS to delay no longer to re-establish communication with Chad, and we have just seen that he had spoken to Miss Gostrey of this intention on hearing from her of the young man's absence. It was not moreover only the assurance so given that prompted him; it was the need of causing his conduct to square with another profession still—the motive he had described to her as his sharpest for now getting away. If he was to get away because of some of the relations involved in staying, the cold attitude toward them might look pedantic in the light of lingering on. He must do both things; he must see Chad, but he must go. The more he thought of the former of these duties the more he felt himself make a subject of insistence of the latter. They were alike intensely present to him as he sat in front of a quiet little café into which he had dropped on quitting Maria's entresol. The rain that had spoiled his evening with her was over; for it was still to him as if his evening *had* been spoiled—though it mightn't have been wholly the rain. It was late when he left the café, yet not too late; he couldn't in any case go straight to bed, and he would walk round by the Boulevard Malesherbes—rather far round—on his way home. Present enough always was the small circumstance that had originally pressed for him the spring of so big a difference—the accident of little Bilham's appearance on the balcony of the mystic troisième at the moment of his first visit, and the effect of it on his sense of what was there before him. He recalled his watch, his wait, and the recognition that had proceeded from the young stranger, that had played frankly into the air and had presently brought him up—things smoothing the way for his first straight step. He had since had occasion, a few times, to pass the house without going in; but had never passed it without again feeling how it had then spoken to him. He stopped short

to-night on coming to sight of it: it was as if his last day were oddly copying his first. The windows of Chad's apartment were open to the balcony—a pair of them lighted; and a figure that had come out and taken up little Bilham's attitude, a figure whose cigarette spark he could see leaned on the rail and looked down at him. It denoted, however, no reappearance of his younger friend; it quickly defined itself in the tempered darkness as Chad's more solid shape; so that Chad's was the attention that, after he had stepped forward into the street and signalled, he easily engaged; Chad's was the voice that, sounding into the night with promptness and seemingly with joy, greeted him and called him up.

That the young man had been visible there just in this position expressed somehow for Strether that, as Maria Gostrey had reported, he had been absent and silent; and our friend drew breath on each landing—the lift, at that hour, having ceased to work—before the implications of the fact. He had been for a week intensely away, away to a distance and alone; but he was more back than ever, and the attitude in which Strether had surprised him was something more than a return—it was clearly a conscious surrender. He had arrived but an hour before, from London, from Lucerne, from Homburg, from no matter where—though the visitor's fancy, on the staircase, liked to fill it out; and after a bath, a talk with Baptiste and a supper of light cold clever French things, which one could see the remains of there in the circle of the lamp, pretty and ultra-Parisian, he had come into the air again for a smoke, was occupied at the moment of Strether's approach in what might have been called taking up his life afresh. His life, his life!—Strether paused anew, on the last flight, at this final rather breathless sense of what Chad's life was doing with Chad's mother's emissary. It was dragging him, at strange hours, up the staircases of the rich; it was keeping him out of bed at the end of long hot days; it was transforming beyond recognition the simple, subtle, conveniently uniform thing that had anciently passed with him for a life

of his own. Why should it concern him that Chad was to be fortified in the pleasant practice of smoking on balconies, of supping on salads, of feeling his special conditions agreeably reaffirm themselves, of finding reassurance in comparisons and contrasts? There was no answer to such a question but that he was still practically committed—he had perhaps never yet so much known it. It made him feel old, and he would buy his railway ticket—feeling, no doubt, older—the next day; but he had meanwhile come up four flights, counting the entresol, at midnight and without a lift, for Chad's life. The young man, hearing him by this time, and with Baptiste sent to rest, was already at the door; so that Strether had before him in full visibility the cause in which he was labouring and even, with the troisième fairly gained, panting a little.

Chad offered him, as always, a welcome in which the cordial and the formal—so far as the formal was the respectful—handsomely met; and after he had expressed a hope that he would let him put him up for the night Strether was in full possession of the key, as it might have been called, to what had lately happened. If he had just thought of himself as old Chad was at sight of him thinking of him as older; he wanted to put him up for the night just because he was ancient and weary. It could never be said the tenant of these quarters wasn't nice to him; a tenant who, if he might indeed now keep him, was probably prepared to work it all still more thoroughly. Our friend had in fact the impression that with the minimum of encouragement Chad would propose to keep him indefinitely; an impression in the lap of which one of his own possibilities seemed to sit. Madame de Vionnet had wished him to stay—so why didn't that happily fit? He could enshrine himself for the rest of his days in his young host's *chambre d'ami* and draw out these days at his young host's expense: there could scarce be greater logical expression of the countenance he had been moved to give. There was literally a minute—it was strange enough—during which he grasped the idea that as he *was* acting, as he could only act, he was

inconsistent. The sign that the inward forces he had obeyed really hung together would be that—in default always of another career—he should promote the good cause by mounting guard on it. These things, during his first minutes, came and went; but they were after all practically disposed of as soon as he had mentioned his errand. He had come to say good-bye—yet that was only a part; so that from the moment Chad accepted his farewell the question of a more ideal affirmation gave way to something else. He proceeded with the rest of his business. 'You'll be a brute, you know—you'll be guilty of the last infamy—if you ever forsake her.'

That, uttered there at the solemn hour, uttered in the place that was full of her influence, was the rest of his business; and when once he had heard himself say it he felt that his message had never before been spoken. It placed his present call immediately on solid ground, and the effect of it was to enable him quite to play with what we have called the key. Chad showed no shade of embarrassment, but had none the less been troubled for him after their meeting in the country; had had fears and doubts on the subject of his comfort. He was disturbed, as it were, only *for* him, and had positively gone away to ease him off, to let him down—if it wasn't indeed rather to screw him up—the more gently. Seeing him now fairly jaded he had come, with characteristic good humour, all the way to meet him, and what Strether thereupon supremely made out was that he would abound for him to the end in conscientious assurances. This was what was between them while the visitor remained; so far from having to go over old ground he found his entertainer keen to agree to everything. It couldn't be put too strongly for him that he'd be a brute. 'Oh rather!—if I should do anything of *that* sort. I hope you believe I really feel it.'

'I want it,' said Strether, 'to be my last word of all to you. I can't say more, you know; and I don't see how I can do more, in every way, than I've done.'

Chad took this, almost artlessly, as a direct allusion. 'You've seen her?'

'Oh yes—to say good-bye. And if I had doubted the truth of what I tell you——'

'She'd have cleared up your doubt?' Chad understood—'rather'—again! It even kept him briefly silent. But he made that up. 'She must have been wonderful.'

'She *was*,' Strether candidly admitted—all of which practically told as a reference to the conditions created by the accident of the previous week.

They appeared for a little to be looking back at it; and that came out still more in what Chad next said. 'I don't know what you've really thought, all along; I never did know—for anything, with you, seemed to be possible. But of course—of course——' Without confusion, quite with nothing but indulgence, he broke down, he pulled up. 'After all, you understand. I spoke to you originally only as I *had* to speak. There's only one way—isn't there?—about such things. However,' he smiled with a final philosophy, 'I see it's all right.'

Strether met his eyes with a sense of multiplying thoughts. What was it that made him at present, late at night and after journeys, so renewedly, so substantially young? Strether saw in a moment what it was—it was that he was younger again than Madame de Vionnet. He himself said immediately none of the things that he was thinking; he said something quite different. 'You *have* really been to a distance?'

'I've been to England.' Chad spoke cheerfully and promptly, but gave no further account of it than to say: 'One must sometimes get off.'

Strether wanted no more facts—he only wanted to justify, as it were, his question. 'Of course you do as you're free to do. But I hope, this time, that you didn't go for *me*.'

'For very shame at bothering you really too much? My dear man,' Chad laughed, 'what *wouldn't* I do for you?'

Strether's easy answer for this was that it was a disposition he had exactly come to profit by. 'Even at the risk of

being in your way I've waited on, you know, for a definite reason.'

Chad took it in. 'Oh yes—for us to make if possible a still better impression.' And he stood there happily exhaling his full general consciousness. 'I'm delighted to gather that you feel we've made it.'

There was a pleasant irony in the words, which his guest, preoccupied and keeping to the point, didn't take up. 'If I had my sense of wanting the rest of the time—the time of their being still on this side,' he continued to explain—'I know now why I wanted it.'

He was as grave, as distinct, as a demonstrator before a blackboard, and Chad continued to face him like an intelligent pupil. 'You wanted to have been put through the whole thing.'

Strether again, for a moment, said nothing; he turned his eyes away, and they lost themselves, through the open window, in the dusky outer air. 'I shall learn from the Bank here where they're now having their letters, and my last word, which I shall write in the morning and which they're expecting as my ultimatum, will so immediately reach them.' The light of his plural pronoun was sufficiently reflected in his companion's face as he again met it; and he completed his demonstration. He pursued indeed as if for himself. 'Of course I've first to justify what I shall do.'

'You're justifying it beautifully!' Chad declared.

'It's not a question of advising you not to go,' Strether said, 'but of absolutely preventing you, if possible, from so much as thinking of it. Let me accordingly appeal to you by all you hold sacred.'

Chad showed a surprise. 'What makes you think me capable——?'

'You'd not only be, as I say, a brute; you'd be,' his companion went on in the same way, 'a criminal of the deepest dye.'

Chad gave a sharper look, as if to gauge a possible suspicion. 'I don't know what should make you think I'm tired of her.'

Strether didn't quite know either, and such impressions, for the imaginative mind, were always too fine, too floating, to produce on the spot their warrant. There was none the less for him, in the very manner of his host's allusion to satiety as a thinkable motive, a slight breath of the ominous. 'I feel how much more she can do for you. She hasn't done it all yet. Stay with her at least till she has.'

'And leave her *then*?'

Chad had kept smiling, but its effect in Strether was a shade of dryness. 'Don't leave her *before*. When you've got all that can be got—I don't say,' he added a trifle grimly. 'That will be the proper time. But as, for you, from such a woman, there will always be something to be got, my remark's not a wrong to her.' Chad let him go on, showing every decent deference, showing perhaps also a candid curiosity for this sharper accent. 'I remember you, you know, as you were.'

'An awful ass, wasn't I?'

The response was as prompt as if he had pressed a spring; it had a ready abundance at which he even winced; so that he took a moment to meet it. 'You certainly then wouldn't have seemed worth all you've let me in for. You've defined yourself better. Your value has quintupled.'

'Well then, wouldn't that be enough——?'

Chad had risked it jocosely, but Strether remained blank. 'Enough?'

'If one *should* wish to live on one's accumulations?' After which, however, as his friend appeared cold to the joke, the young man as easily dropped it. 'Of course I really never forget, night or day, what I owe her. I owe her everything. I give you my word of honour,' he frankly rang out, 'that I'm not a bit tired of her.' Strether at this only gave him a stare: the way youth could express itself was again and again a wonder. He meant no harm, though he might after all be capable of much; yet he spoke of being 'tired' of her almost as he might have spoken of being tired of roast mutton for dinner. 'She has never for a moment yet bored me—never been wanting, as the cleverest women sometimes

are, in tact. She has never talked about her tact—as even they too sometimes talk; but she has always had it. She has never had it more'—he handsomely made the point—'than just lately.' And he scrupulously went further. 'She has never been anything I could call a burden.'

Strether for a moment said nothing; then he spoke gravely, with his shade of dryness deepened. 'Oh if you didn't do her justice——!'

'I *should* be a beast, eh?'

Strether devoted no time to saying what he would be; *that*, visibly, would take them far. If there was nothing for it but to repeat, however, repetition was no mistake. 'You owe her everything—very much more than she can ever owe you. You've in other words duties to her, of the most positive sort; and I don't see what other duties—as the others are presented to you—can be held to go before them.'

Chad looked at him with a smile. 'And you know of course about the others, eh?—since it's you yourself who have done the presenting.'

'Much of it—yes—and to the best of my ability. But not all—from the moment your sister took my place.'

'She didn't,' Chad returned. 'Sally took a place, certainly; but it was never, I saw from the first moment, to be yours. No one—with us—will ever take yours. It wouldn't be possible.'

'Ah of course,' sighed Strether, 'I knew it. I believe you're right. No one in the world, I imagine, was ever so portentously solemn. There I am,' he added with another sigh, as if weary enough, on occasion, of this truth. 'I was made so.'

Chad appeared for a little to consider the way he was made; he might for this purpose have measured him up and down. His conclusion favoured the fact. '*You* have never needed any one to make you better. There has never been any one good enough. They couldn't,' the young man declared.

His friend hesitated. 'I beg your pardon. They *have*.'

Chad showed, not without amusement, his doubt. 'Who then?'

Strether—though a little dimly—smiled at him. 'Women —too.'

'"Two"?'—Chad stared and laughed. 'Oh I don't believe, for such work, in any more than one! So you're proving too much. And what *is* beastly, at all events,' he added, 'is losing you.'

Strether had set himself in motion for departure, but at this he paused. 'Are you afraid?'

'Afraid——?'

'Of doing wrong. I mean away from my eye.' Before Chad could speak, however, he had taken himself up. 'I *am* certainly,' he laughed, 'prodigious.'

'Yes, you spoil us for all the stupid——!' This might have been, on Chad's part, in its extreme emphasis, almost too freely extravagant; but it was full, plainly enough, of the intention of comfort, it carried with it a protest against doubt and a promise, positively, of performance. Picking up a hat in the vestibule he came out with his friend, came downstairs, took his arm, affectionately, as to help and guide him, treating him if not exactly as aged and infirm, yet as a noble eccentric who appealed to tenderness, and keeping on with him, while they walked, to the next corner and the next. 'You needn't tell me, you needn't tell me!'—this again, as they proceeded, he wished to make Strether feel. What he needn't tell him was now at last, in the geniality of separation, anything at all it concerned him to know. He knew, up to the hilt—that really came over Chad; he understood, felt, recorded his vow; and they lingered on it as they had lingered in their walk to Strether's hotel the night of their first meeting. The latter took, at this hour, all he could get, he had given all he had had to give; he was as depleted as if he had spent his last sou. But there was just one thing for which, before they broke off, Chad seemed disposed slightly to bargain. His companion needn't, as he said, tell him, but he might himself mention that he had been getting some news of the art of advertisement. He

came out quite suddenly with his announcement, while Strether wondered if his revived interest were what had taken him, with strange inconsequence, over to London. He appeared at all events to have been looking into the question and had encountered a revelation. Advertising scientifically worked presented itself thus as the great new force. 'It really does the thing, you know.'

They were face to face under the street-lamp as they had been the first night, and Strether, no doubt, looked blank. 'Affects, you mean, the sale of the object advertised?'

'Yes—but affects it extraordinarily; really beyond what one had supposed. I mean of course when it's done as one makes out that, in our roaring age, it *can* be done. I've been finding out a little; though it doubtless doesn't amount to much more than what you originally, so awfully vividly- and all, very nearly, that first night—put before me. It's an art like another, and infinite like all the arts.' He went on as if for the joke of it—almost as if his friend's face amused him. 'In the hands, naturally, of a master. The right man must take hold. With the right man to work it *c'est un monde*.'

Strether had watched him quite as if, there on the pavement, without a pretext, he had begun to dance a fancy step. 'Is what you're thinking of that you yourself, in the case you have in mind, would be the right man?'

Chad had thrown back his light coat and thrust each of his thumbs into an armhole of his waistcoat; in which position his fingers played up and down. 'Why, what is he but what you yourself, as I say, took me for when you first came out?'

Strether felt a little faint, but he coerced his attention. 'Oh yes, and there's no doubt that, with your natural parts, you'd have much in common with him. Advertising is clearly at this time of day the secret of trade. It's quite possible it will be open to you—giving the whole of your mind to it—to make the whole place hum with you. Your mother's appeal is to the whole of your mind, and that's exactly the strength of her case.'

Chad's fingers continued to twiddle, but he had something of a drop. 'Ah we've been through my mother's case!'

'So I thought. Why then do you speak of the matter?'

'Only because it was a part of our original discussion. To wind up where we began, my interest's purely platonic. There at any rate the fact is—the fact of the possible. I mean the money in it.'

'Oh damn the money in it!' said Strether. And then as the young man's fixed smile seemed to shine out more strange: 'Shall you give your friend up for the money in it?'

Chad preserved his handsome grimace as well as the rest of his attitude. 'You're not altogether—in your so great "solemnity"—kind. Haven't I been drinking you in—showing you all I feel you're worth to me? What have I done, what am I doing, but cleave to her to the death? The only thing is,' he good-humouredly explained, 'that one can't but have it before one, in the cleaving—the point where the death comes in. Don't be afraid for *that*. It's pleasant to a fellow's feelings,' he developed, 'to "size-up" the bribe he applies his foot to.'

'Oh then if all you want's a kickable surface the bribe's enormous.'

'Good. Then there it goes!' Chad administered his kick with fantastic force and sent an imaginary object flying. It was accordingly as if they were once more rid of the question and could come back to what really concerned them. 'Of course I shall see you to-morrow.'

But Strether scarce heeded the plan proposed for this; he had still the impression—not the slighter for the simulated kick—of an irrelevant hornpipe or jig. 'You're restless.'

'Ah,' returned Chad as they parted, 'you're exciting.'

V

HE HAD, however, within two days, another separation to face He had sent Maria Gostrey a word early, by hand, to

ask if he might come to breakfast; in consequence of which, at noon, she awaited him in the cool shade of her little Dutch-looking dining-room. This retreat was at the back of the house, with a view of a scrap of old garden that had been saved from modern ravage; and though he had on more than one other occasion had his legs under its small and peculiarly polished table of hospitality, the place had never before struck him as so sacred to pleasant knowledge, to intimate charm, to antique order, to a neatness that was almost august. To sit there was, as he had told his hostess before, to see life reflected for the time in ideally kept pewter; which was somehow becoming, improving to life, so that one's eyes were held and comforted. Strether's were comforted at all events now—and the more that it was the last time—with the charming effect, on the board bare of a cloth and proud of its perfect surface, of the small old crockery and old silver, matched by the more substantial pieces happily disposed about the room. The specimens of vivid Delf, in particular, had the dignity of family portraits; and it was in the midst of them that our friend resignedly expressed himself. He spoke even with a certain philosophic humour. 'There's nothing more to wait for; I seem to have done a good day's work. I've let them have it all round. I've seen Chad, who has been to London and come back. He tells me I'm "exciting", and I seem indeed pretty well to have upset every one. I've at any rate excited *him*. He's distinctly restless.'

'You've excited *me*,' Miss Gostrey smiled. '*I'm* distinctly restless.'

'Oh you were that when I found you. It seems to me I've rather got you out of it. What's this,' he asked as he looked about him, 'but a haunt of ancient peace?'

'I wish with all my heart,' she presently replied, 'I could make you treat it as a haven of rest.' On which they fronted each other across the table, as if things unuttered were in the air.

Strether seemed, in his way, when he next spoke, to take some of them up. 'It wouldn't give me—that would be the

trouble—what it will, no doubt, still give you. I'm not,' he explained, leaning back in his chair, but with his eyes on a small ripe round melon—'in real harmony with what surrounds me. You *are*. I take it too hard. You *don't*. It makes —that's what it comes to in the end—a fool of me.' Then at a tangent, 'What has he been doing in London?' he demanded.

'Ah one may go to London,' Maria laughed. 'You know *I* did.'

Yes—he took the reminder. 'And you brought *me* back.' He brooded there opposite to her, but without gloom. 'Whom has Chad brought? He's full of ideas. And I wrote to Sarah,' he added, 'the first thing this morning. So I'm square. I'm ready for them.'

She neglected certain parts of this speech in the interest of others. 'Marie said to me the other day that she felt him to have the makings of an immense man of business.'

'There it is. He's the son of his father!'

'But *such* a father!'

'Ah, just the right one from that point of view! But it isn't his father in him,' Strether added, 'that troubles me.'

'What is it then?' He came back to his breakfast; he partook presently of the charming melon, which she liberally cut for him; and it was only after this that he met her question. Then moreover it was but to remark that he'd answer her presently. She waited, she watched, she served him and amused him, and it was perhaps with this last idea that she soon reminded him of his having never yet named to her the article produced at Woollett. 'Do you remember our talking of it in London—that night at the play?' Before he could say yes, however, she had put it to him for other matters. Did he remember, did he remember—this and that of their first days? He remembered everything, bringing up with humour even things of which she professed no recollection, things she vehemently denied; and falling back above all on the great interest of their early time, the curiosity felt by both of them as to where he would 'come out'. They had so assumed it was to be in some wonderful

place—they had thought of it as so very *much* out. Well, that was doubtless what it had been—since he had come out just there. He was out, in truth, as far as it was possible to be, and must now rather bethink himself of getting in again. He found on the spot the image of his recent history; he was like one of the figures of the old clock at Berne. *They* came out, on one side, at their hour, jigged along their little course in the public eye, and went in on the other side. He too had jigged his little course—him too a modest retreat awaited. He offered now, should she really like to know, to name the great product of Woollett. It would be a great commentary on everything. At this she stopped him off; she not only had no wish to know, but she wouldn't know for the world. She had done with the products of Woollett—for all the good she had got from them. She desired no further news of them, and she mentioned that Madame de Vionnet herself had, to her knowledge, lived exempt from the information he was ready to supply. She had never consented to receive it, though she would have taken it, under stress, from Mrs Pocock. But it was a matter about which Mrs Pocock appeared to have had little to say—never sounding the word—and it didn't signify now. There was nothing clearly for Maria Gostrey that signified now—save one sharp point, that is, to which she came in time. 'I don't know whether it's before you as a possibility that, left to himself, Mr Chad may after all go back. I judge that it *is* more or less so before you, from what you just now said of him.'

Her guest had his eyes on her, kindly but attentively, as if foreseeing what was to follow this. 'I don't think it will be for the money.' And then as she seemed uncertain: 'I mean I don't believe it will be for that he'll give her up.'

'Then he *will* give her up?'

Strether waited a moment, rather slow and deliberate now, drawing out a little this last soft stage, pleading with her in various suggestive and unspoken ways for patience and understanding. 'What were you just about to ask me?'

'Is there anything he can do that would make you patch it up?'

'With Mrs Newsome?'

Her assent, as if she had had a delicacy about sounding the name, was only in her face; but she added with it: 'Or is there anything he can do that would make *her* try it?'

'To patch it up with me?' His answer came at last in a conclusive headshake. 'There's nothing any one can do. It's over. Over for both of us.'

Maria wondered, seemed a little to doubt. 'Are you so sure for her?'

'Oh yes—sure now. Too much has happened. I'm different for her.'

She took it in then, drawing a deeper breath. 'I see. So that as she's different for *you*—'

'Ah but,' he interrupted, 'she's not.' And as Miss Gostrey wondered again: 'She's the same. She's more than ever the same. But I do what I didn't before—I *see* her.'

He spoke gravely and as if responsibly—since he had to pronounce; and the effect of it was slightly solemn, so that she simply exclaimed 'Oh!' Satisfied and grateful, however, she showed in her own next words an acceptance of his statement. 'What then do you go home to?'

He had pushed his plate a little away, occupied with another side of the matter; taking refuge verily in that side and feeling so moved that he soon found himself on his feet. He was affected in advance by what he believed might come from her, and he would have liked to forestall it and deal with it tenderly; yet in the presence of it he wished still more to be—though as smoothly as possible—deterrent and conclusive. He put the question by for the moment; he told her more about Chad. 'It would have been impossible to meet me more than he did last night on the question of the infamy of not sticking to her.'

'Is that what you called it for him—"infamy"?'

'Oh rather! I described to him in detail the base creature he'd be, and he quite agrees with me about it.'

'So that it's really as if you had nailed him?'

'Quite really as if——! I told him I should curse him.'

'Oh,' she smiled, 'you *have* done it.' And then having thought again: 'You *can't* after that propose——!' Yet she scanned his face.

'Propose again to Mrs Newsome?'

She hesitated afresh, but she brought it out. 'I've never believed, you know, that you did propose. I always believed it was really she—and, so far as that goes, I can understand it. What I mean is,' she explained, 'that with such a spirit—the spirit of curses!—your breach is past mending. She has only to know what you've done to him never again to raise a finger.'

'I've done,' said Strether, 'what I could—one can't do more. He protests his devotion and his horror. But I'm not sure I've saved him. He protests too much. He asks how one can dream of his being tired. But he has all life before him.'

Maria saw what he meant. 'He's formed to please.'

'And it's our friend who has formed him.' Strether felt in it the strange irony.

'So it's scarcely his fault!'

'It's at any rate his danger. I mean,' said Strether, 'It's hers. But she knows it.'

'Yes, she knows it. And is your idea,' Miss Gostrey asked, 'that there was some other woman in London?'

'Yes. No. That is, I *have* no ideas. I'm afraid of them. I've done with them.' And he put out his hand to her. 'Good-bye.'

It brought her back to her unanswered question. 'To what do you go home?'

'I don't know. There will always be something.'

'To a great difference,' she said as she kept his hand.

'A great difference—no doubt. Yet I shall see what I can make of it.'

'Shall you make anything so good——?' But, as if remembering what Mrs Newsome had done, it was as far as she went.

He had sufficiently understood. 'So good as this place at

this moment? So good as what *you* make of everything you touch?' He took a minute to say, for, really and truly, what stood about him there in her offer—which was as the offer of exquisite service, of lightened care, for the rest of his days—might well have tempted. It built him softly round, it roofed him warmly over, it rested, all so firm, on selection. And what ruled selection was beauty and knowledge. It was awkward, it was almost stupid, not to seem to prize such things; yet, none the less, so far as they made his opportunity they made it only for a moment. She would moreover understand—she always understood.

That indeed might be, but meanwhile she was going on. 'There's nothing, you know, I wouldn't do for you.'

'Oh yes—I know.'

'There's nothing,' she repeated, 'in all the world.'

'I know. I know. But all the same I must go.' He had got it at last. 'To be right.'

'To be right?'

She had echoed it in vague deprecation, but he felt it already clear for her. 'That, you see, is my only logic. Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself.'

She thought. 'But with your wonderful impressions you'll have got a great deal.'

'A great deal'—he agreed. 'But nothing like *you*. It's you who would make me wrong!'

Honest and fine, she couldn't greatly pretend she didn't see it. Still, she could pretend just a little. 'But why should you be so dreadfully right?'

'That's the way that—if I must go—you yourself would be the first to want me. And I can't do anything else.'

So then she had to take it, though still with her defeated protest. 'It isn't so much your *being* "right"—it's your horrible sharp eye for what makes you so.'

'Oh but you're just as bad yourself. You can't resist me when I point that out.'

She sighed it at last all comically, all tragically, away. 'I can't indeed resist you.'

'Then there we are!' said Strether.

NOTES

(Details of works referred to can be found in 'Further reading'. Dates, where given, indicate the edition used. The references are to page and line numbers.)

1.1. *Strether's first question.* Ian Watt, in 'The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*', gives a close rhetorical analysis of this opening, showing its epistemological significance for the rest of the novel. Cf. also Bernard Richards's comparison between Strether and the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* in J. Goode, ed., *The Air of Reality*, pp. 56–67.

4.8. *the mere laid table of conversation.* This is a very humorous novel, if quietly so. D. W. Jefferson appreciates this in his *Henry James and the Modern Reader*, pp. 188–201.

7.3. *It may be communicated.* This is a fairly rare slip from the Flaubertian *style indirect libre* or *erlebte Rede* to which the reader will by now be accustomed. 'This style differs from direct speech ("he thought that") by omitting introductory verbs and conjunctions and transposing direct speech into the past tense colloquially, at the same time varying the syntax from those appropriate to the character to those appropriate to the narrator' (Bellringer, *The Ambassadors*, p. 44). James's direct interventions are therefore rare, but they have all been pounced on and interpreted by John E. Tilford Jr., in his 'James the Old Intruder'.

7.7. *she was equipped . . .* There are many such premonitory guides for the reader, as to whom to trust for the facts of the story. But they are of course not picked up by Strether. On second reading such ironies have a sharper focus.

8.11. *Maria Gostrey.* Maria is, like Waymarsh, what James called a *ficelle*, the reader's friend as much as Strether's (cf. *The Art of the Novel*, p. 322). They help Strether analyse situations, and also appreciate his own position within them. Much of the novel is conversational *post mortem* of this kind.

9.26. *Mr Lewis Lambert Strether.* Lewis Lambert in Balzac's novel of that title (1832–3) attempts to write a treatise on the will; he falls in love with a Mlle Villenois, but then also into a cataleptic fit, just before his marriage. Cf. Quentin Anderson, *The American*

Henry James, pp. 213–16, and J. W. Gargano, '*The Ambassadors* and *Lewis Lambert*'.

11.19. *Woollett.* Cf. note to 36.21.

12.25. *I bear on my back the huge load of our national consciousness.* This is, however, a divided one, as James well knew, between the patrician conservatives and those devoted to commercial progress. Since no French character fully expresses his or her 'national consciousness' in this book (cf. note to 348.29) it is not so much concerned with the 'international theme' as with conflicts within late nineteenth-century American moral thinking.

24.1. *Major Pendennis.* This delicate complimentary transaction establishes Maria has having the necessary literary sensitivity. The allusion is to the opening chapter of Thackeray's *Pendennis* (1848–50).

26.13. *at the Megatherium.* One of Major Pendennis's clubs in Thackeray's *The Newcomes* (1853–5).

26.19. *the Rows.* 'Chester values its Rows, an architectural idiosyncrasy which must be seen to be appreciated. They are a sort of Gothic edition of the blessed arcades and porticoes of Italy, and consist, roughly speaking, of a running public passage tunnelled through the second storey of the houses' (Henry James, 'Chester', *English Hours*, ed. L. Edel, Oxford, 1981, p. 38).

27.8. *Mr Burchell, at Dr Primrose's fireside.* An allusion to ch. xi of Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766). Mr Burchell, a baronet in disguise, is not taken in, as the Vicar's family are, by the conversation concerning high society carried on by two London prostitutes disguised as ladies of fashion. He signals this by the interjection 'Fudge!' (Cf. 384.37 and note.)

35.20. *like Mary Stuart.* Executed for treason by Queen Elizabeth in 1587.

35.27. *he had married.* This may come as a surprise—and the general featurelessness of this episode makes Strether seem less than interested in the erotic for himself. The reader will have to decide whether Strether's behaviour with women in later chapters will justify Philip Sicker's description of him as approaching 'the perfect condition of psychosexual androgyny' (*Love and the Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Henry James*, p. 124).

36.21. *not as the types of Woollett.* As emerges in this chapter, Strether's share of the 'load of national consciousness' (cf. note to 12.25) is as specific to Woollett as is Waymarsh's to Milrose and the stout defence of American constitutional values. The milieu of

Mrs Newsome who is the central (absent) subject of the novel, Woollett is unimaginative, self-important and provincial, developing commercially but with little place for ideas, protected from 'life' and, as Strether has already remarked, without much time for hedonism (11.19).

36.30. *in the drama.* We are expected to see that the play may offer a melodramatic 'lower' version of the novel's own plot. But in what sense? How far are 'the figures and faces in the stalls . . . interchangeable with those on the stage'?

36.37. *Chadwick Newsome.* The object of the quest at last has a name (and he will indeed, like the character in the play, appear in evening dress).

40.31. *That's the root of the evil.* This remark may help us to interpret Chad's final decisions. In James's novels money is often simply assumed; in this one it is comically disguised (cf.41.11 and note).

41.11. *It's a little thing they make.* The 'little thing' has caused much speculation among readers. Possible objects are button hooks (Forster) and alarm clocks (R. W. Stallman, 'Time and the Unnamed Article in *The Ambassadors*'). Here perhaps Strether reflects James's own self-distancing from American business life, whose vulgarities were much criticised by English writers. Even if the source of the Newsome money is a joke, one might wish to decide whether Terry Eagleton is correct in arguing that James's characters live in a 'sealed realm of consciousness' above social conflict and division and the source of the money they can so heroically renounce in triumph over the 'possessive individualism of others'. They are thus 'parasitic upon a bourgeois material base which is constantly suppressed' (*Criticism and Ideology*, pp. 141–3).

42.11. *Saleratus.* Sodium bicarbonate, used as baking powder.

44.30. *Woollett has a Review.* This is Mrs Newsome's 'tribute to the ideal' and is unsuccessfully concerned with economic matters. It may compensate a little for the corrupt foundations of the family fortune.

46.25. *the very secret of the prison-house.* 'But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison-house, / I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul', as the Ghost puts it in *Hamlet* I. v.

53.2. *the bankers of the Rue Scribe.* On the right bank of the Seine, just off the Place de l'Opéra.

54.4. *from the Gymnase to the Café Riche.* A theatre and a fashionable restaurant. James establishes his characters as frequenting those areas of Paris fashionable amongst American tourists. Cf. his *Parisian Sketches.*

55.16. *the Tuileries.* The garden adjoining the Louvre. Strether notices the sort of thing that we find in Impressionist painting (and much more conventional painting of the period); as he remarks later on, 'the air had a taste of something mixed with art'. But he also remembers that the Palace was burnt down in the uprising of 1871.

55.31. *the air . . . chef.* The first part of this is a serious use of the art/reality antitheses of the novel; but the second is equally typical in its humorous bathos. Cf. Campos, *The View of France*, p. 115: 'The previous knowledge that France is the country of art, and that everything there makes a subject, gives James's characters a heightened consciousness of beauty at those moments, which act as a kind of catharsis to the emotions.'

56.6. *the Luxembourg Gardens.* On the left bank. James used a photograph by Alvin Langdon Coburn of the gardens as the frontispiece to the second volume of the New York Edition of the novel.

58.20. *taking things as they came.* Since no other characters want it, Strether will not be allowed this wise passivity; and nor will any reader concerned with the twists and contradictions of James's plot.

62.3. *a mere rich kernel of economics, politics, ethics.* This summarises the essentially non-literary values of Woollett, which contrast with the 'lemon-coloured', i.e. French, volumes Strether thinks of earlier in this paragraph. James interestingly (for 1903) remarks that they are subconsciously present to him. And the paragraph also goes on to mention his 'instinctive knowledge of what was coming out, in Paris' as Strether feels 'so many fears confirmed'. The whole passage is, as so often in James, ripe for psychoanalytical interpretation, with its imagery of temple and theatre.

63.11. *the vast bright Babylon.* Represented also in other James stories, particularly 'Madame de Mauves' (1874), as a centre of corruption. James's various presentations of French culture are ably discussed in Alan Bellringer, *The Ambassadors*, pp. 14 ff. It is passages like this—the symbolic evocation of place—that lead to Leavis's attack on later James: 'Is anything adequately realised? If we are to take the elaboration of the theme

in the spirit in which we are meant to take it, haven't we to take the symbol too much at the glamorous face value it has for Strether? Isn't that is, the energy of the "doing" (and the energy demanded for reading) disproportionate to the theme—to any issues that are concretely held and presented?' (*The Great Tradition*, p. 161). Leavis here uses all his usual rhetorical tricks of persuasion, but has missed the point. He has failed to see precisely what he says is not there—the central ironic attitude to French civilisation. Beyond this, his argument is simply a plea for a more naturalistic kind of novel. But the reader who has got this far is probably not wishing he or she was reading something else.

64.14. *Melancholy Mürger.* Henri Mürger, *Scenes de Bohème* (1848), the basis for the opera *La Bohème* by Puccini (1896).

64.23. *Montagne Sainte-Geneviève.* In the Latin Quarter, and containing the remains of the Abbey in which the patron saint of Paris is buried.

66.5. *a Latin motto.* 'All wound, the last kills', from ch. ii of Théophile Gautier's *Voyage en Espagne* (1845), described by James as a masterpiece in *French Poets and Novelists* (London, 1878), p. 52.

66.24. *the Odéon.* In which was performed mostly French classical drama.

69.4. *the violet air.* Remembered by Eliot in *The Waste Land* (1922), line 372, to characterise the atmosphere of his 'Unreal City'.

72.6. *a man and a brother.* That is, egalitarian and fraternal. Part of the play of political contrasts between France and America — Strether accepts it, and Waymarsh cannot.

73.22. *another degustation of the Léoville.* Sold in the late nineteenth century under this name—subsequently divided into Las Cases, Poyféré, and Barton. But James may be being vague.

74.14. *John Little Bilham.* The art student Little Billee in George du Maurier's famous *Trilby* (1894) may lurk behind James's character.

82.31. *seeing things as they were.* The phrase echoes Arnold. This influence is exhaustively studied in Bellringer, *The Ambassadors*, 23 ff.

83.6. *the little entresol of the Quartier Marbœuf.* That is, a mezzanine apartment on the right bank between the Seine and the Champs Elysées.

87.16. *one of the splendid Titians.* This is Titian's *Man with*

the/a Glove (*c.*1520–2): see H. Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian*, vol. 2, *The Portraits* (London 1971), Cat. no. 64.

90.18. *an excellent box at the Français.* That is, the Théâtre de Comédie Française.

91.8. *a small blue missive.* This is the 'petit bleu' of p. 397, a special delivery letter transmitted within Paris through pneumatic tubes.

95.34. *one of the sensations that count in life.* As they would to a good Paterian. But this checked and then released apprehension of identity will strike Strether in a rather different way in XI.iv.

105.20. *Chad had been made over.* This is one of many idiosyncratically emphasised colloquial phrases which James makes as mysterious as, for their time, they may have been commonplace. Cf. Yeazell, *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James.*

119.28. *his dimness.* Maria Gostrey's reactions may well echo those of the reader by this point: but Strether and the reader have, even at this stage, surprisingly little factual information.

135.4. *the great Gloriani.* Gloriani figures also in James's *Roderick Hudson* (1875), whose ch. vi provides a sketch of his aesthetic and reveals him to be an American of French extraction, 'remotely perhaps of Italian'. But neither description helps us to 'place' Gloriani in any very particular part of the art world contemporaneous to the novel. The setting may be modelled on the Whistlers' garden house in the rue du Bac which James visited in 1893.

136.34. *the place itself . . . in the heart of the Faubourg Saint-Germain.* On the left bank. The 'aristocratic' quarter of Paris, as readers of Proust will appreciate.

137.13. *a strong indifferent persistent order.* Notably, Catholic and aristocratic.

140.3. *gros bonnets . . . even Jews.* The latter may be a sign of pro-Dreyfus sentiment, but cf. 162.8.

144.28. *Michelangelesque.* Part of a typically silly and affected remark, referring presumably to the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and to the statue of Moses.

153.6. *Live all you can.* This speech contains the initial idea of *The Ambassadors.* Jonathan Sturges reported to James on 30 October 1895 a speech made to him by W. D. Howells in Paris in 1894, and it appears amplified by James in his notebook on 31 October: 'Oh, you are young, you are young—be glad of it: be glad of it and *live.* Live all you can: it's a mistake not to. It doesn't

so much matter what you do—but live. This place makes it all come over me. I see it now. I haven't done so—and now I'm old. It's too late. It has gone past me—I've lost it. You have time. You are young. Live!' (see *Notebooks*, pp. 225–8). A different version of this speech is in the Preface (p. xxix above).

159.1. *old school-friends.* This is a convenient coincidence, and yet previous acquaintance in a James novel can provoke reticence as well as information.

162.8. *as polyglot as a little Jewess.* James blithely allows Little Bilham earlier (140.5) and Miss Gostrey here to express this sort of prejudice.

162.23. *Roumelian sins.* Committed, one assumes, in this part of the Turkish empire in the Balkans.

171.14. *Rue de Bellechasse.* In the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

172.3. *some prosperity of the First Empire.* i.e. the period of Napoleon (1804–15).

172.9. *the post-revolutionary period . . . of Chateaubriand, of Madame de Stael . . . of Lamartine.* French writers whose dates are respectively 1768–1848, 1776–1817 and 1790–1869, and who have the common characteristic of Romanticism.

186.9. *some great flat sheet of water.* The imagery of this passage from Chad's picture of a French landscape, on through the 'indefinite greeting' is so to speak thematic. It anticipates the climax of the story in XI.iv.

187.33. *she's various.* Such remarks have prompted comparisons between Madame de Vionnet and Cleopatra, which Strether certainly entertains at the opening of the next chapter. One may doubt how far they can be taken (cf. Introduction) but U. C. Knoepflmacher in '"O Rare for Strether!" *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Ambassadors*' presents the allusive evidence.

192.13. *waist-high in the summer surge.* This and the previous image is reminiscent of some of the more lubricious (and academic) painting of Baudry and Cabanel in a slightly earlier period. In any case it leads on to the comparison with Cleopatra as 'slowly uncovered'. Whether such reveries allow us to conclude that Strether's judgment is warped by his desire for Mme de Vionnet is a matter of debate. Cf X.ii, p. 368.

197.2. *He remembered the tone . . . reason.* Bellringer (*The Ambassadors*, p. 138) comments: 'Here Strether acknowledges to himself certain Pater-like thoughts on the degree of liberation it is wise to recommend to young men (compare the note to the conclusion to the third edition of Pater's *The Renaissance* (1888),

explaining why the conclusion had been omitted from the second edition of 1877), while bringing in "reason" as a criterion for conduct in Paris.'

206.21. *no errand in such a place.* Strether, like James, has no religious beliefs, and the morality of the novel is independent of them.

210.36. *the great romancer.* Victor Hugo; the romance his *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831).

221.35. *sitting at the door of his tent.* An allusion to the behaviour of Achilles in the *Iliad*, i. Though Waymarsh can hardly claim to have been deprived of a female companion like Briseis, he presumably refuses to discuss strategy with Strether.

245.17 *Chartres . . . Fontainebleau . . . Rouen.* It is difficult to know why Strether imagines himself to be on the way to Italy at Fontainebleau, though it is famous for its Renaissance palace.

263.1. *his identity.* James's chapters concerning the Pococks have a marvellous comic asperity, and one feels that such perceptions are only very nominally lent to Strether. Sarah Pocock's 'forms of affability that were in a high degree assertive' (p. 255) produce an animating response.

266.12. *the Varieties.* S. P. Rosenbaum (*The Ambassadors*, 1964, p. 216) cites the Baedeker for 1900 for Paris, which states that the Variétés staged 'Vaudevilles, farces, operettas, and similar lively pieces of essentially Parisian character'.

295.7. *we're marrying Jeanne.* The arranged marriage, which is also a theme of *The American* (1877) was perceived by James, as of course by many others, as leading to double standards in sexual matters.

300.6. *Bignon's.* Bignon managed the Café Riche.

307.6. *the salmon-coloured Revue.* The *Revue des Deux Mondes*. Cf. 174.5.

307.7. *Fromentin's 'Maîtres d'autrefois'.* Reviewed by James on publication in 1876: see *The Painter's Eye*, ed. J. L. Sweeney (London, 1956), 116–21.

328.4. *kept him going.* This and the following passage may be symptomatic of Strether the pragmatist. Cf. Introduction, and R. A. Hocks, *Henry James and the Pragmatistic Thought* (1975).

348.29 *our queer ignorance, our queer misconceptions.* Strether admits the problem, but doesn't claim to have the answer, consistent with Christophe Campos's claim that 'At heart [James] was fascinated by Europeans, and yet he always suspected them of possessing some secret that was out of his reach because

they would never express it clearly' (*The View of France*, p. 137).

353.1. *He went late that evening . . .* The Harper editor of the first American edition (Nov. 1903) here transposed this chapter with the following one, perhaps misled by the apparent chronology of the opening sentences. This is late evening; in XI.ii, it appears at first to be the same afternoon, but is in fact the next day (p. 366). This error escaped notice through a period in which critics were most concerned to praise James for his formal procedures, until Robert E. Young published 'An Error in *The Ambassadors*'. James thus himself failed to notice the error in revising the text for the New York Edition.

380.20. *a certain small Lambinet.* Lambinet was a romantic landscape painter, remembered by James in *A Small Boy and Others* as one of those who in his youth 'summed up for the American collector in New York and Boston markets the idea of the modern in the masterly' (p. 193). Sweeney, in his introduction to *The Painter's Eye*, pp. 28 f. thinks James's mode of description here is impressionist, as do Violet H. Winner in *Henry James and the Visual Arts* (p. 77), and Charles R. Anderson in *Person, Place and Thing in Henry James's Novels* (p. 239). But it is so unspecifically impressionist, except in some very extended literary sense that applies, as Ford Madox Ford thought, to all of James, that it is perhaps best to leave the Lambinet as a Lambinet, and James's description as following it.

382.26. *of Maupassant.* For his view of Maupassant (1850–93), see James's *The Future of the Novel*, pp. 193–225.

384.37. *Shakespeare and the musical glasses.* Cf. above, note to 27.8. The 'fashionable topics' of the Vicar of Wakefield's visitors were 'pictures, taste, Shakespeare, and the musical glasses'.

419.7. *a technical lie.* Strether's climactic perceptions in XI.ii and iii depend on his sense of being deceived. Here is the rationalisation of the matter *via* those social conventions which remind us that we are reading a Victorian novel. But once Maria Gostrey is driven to announce her own convention of withdrawal, she gives Strether the clue to Madame de Vionnet's character (p. 420) that will carry him through to the end of the novel, and control his final attitude to Chad.

430.38. *the art of advertisement.* Alwyn Berland believes (*Culture and Conduct in the Novels of Henry James*) that Chad abandons Madame de Vionnet for 'the world of grab' having been 'conditioned by flash values' (p. 205). But the reader might wonder at this stage what else Chad might be expected to do.

438.38. *Then there we are!* Strether comes to a moral conclusion which may seem eccentric: but James is also balancing the literary values of *The Ambassadors* here. That is, the 'logic' of the affair versus 'wonderful impressions'; Maria Gostrey's reminder of the tragicomic dimensions of the novel, in which perhaps 'what ruled selection was beauty and knowledge'; and Strether's final ambiguous acceptance of the fact that Maria can 'resist' him, with its neat poise between argument and feeling. 'There we are!' says Strether—like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, he intends to go but stays in place. The converse may be true of the Prince at the end of *The Golden Bowl*.

SELECTED VARIANT READINGS

	NYE	
3.2	but on happy terms with each other	but expressive and agreeable PAE
4.20	under this unsought protection	with his new friend PAE
6.13	intenser	more subtle PAE
62.22	This suggested the question of whether	With his letters in his lap, then, in his Luxembourg nook—letters held with nervous, unconscious intensity—he thought of things in a strange, vast order, swinging at moments off into space, into past and future, and then dropping fast, with some loss of breath, but with a soft, reassuring thud, down to yesterday and today. Thus it was that he came back to his puzzle of the evening, the question of whether E
66.2	irresistibly sharp: he	overwhelmingly intense; the wretched youth
118.34	uncanny	abnormal PE
135.25	ascetic	inbred PE
188.33	interest	romance PAE
219.37	with a force brought to so fine a head	with a spirit brought to so fine a point PA with a spirit whose lightest throbs were so full E
251.6	present to a sort of thing, as he synthetically phrased it to himself	present to a force AE
253.5	bamboozled	beguiled E
255.24	girdle of a maid	waist of a girl E
255.27	mercifully vague	restfully dim E
261.2	a world that had grown	a rank world that he had grown E
285.25	lacked news	lacked the direct and intimate news

NYE

288.35 awful . . . 'Awful?' — very advanced . . . 'Advanced?' E

295.5 not stupid — not, like almost everyone, stupid E

312.5 all the Mr Brookses and Mr Snookses — all the Mr. Coxes and Mr. Coleses E

319.8 the knowledge offered to his colleague — the knowledge, the *panem et circenses* again, offered to his fellow-emissary E

338.4 approach, from that quarter, to admitted consciousness — approach to a meaning PAE

375.3 it's to Mrs Newsome — it's to the forfeiture of possession of Mrs. Newsome E

375.8 I've been as disappointed in her — I've been as disconcerted, as disappointed, as disillusioned by her E

379.1 the dreadful creature that *I* — the dreadful insidious parasite that *I* E

380.32 as the picture he *would* have brought — as the material acquisition that, in all his time, he had most sharply failed of E

384.37 nothing more than Shakespeare and the musical glasses; but it — nothing more than such questions as the difference between Victor Hugo and the English poets; Victor Hugo, for whom one could have but a plural comparison, and the English poets, whom his friend quite surprisingly, rather quaintly and archaically, knew. Yet it E

402.32 Caprices — Inequalities E

415.27 These tints of feeling — These shades PE

417.2 He had grown clear, in a flash, on — He had shut to, with a click, on E

438.29 "That's the — He considered, but he kept it straight. "That's the

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Annotation

La misión de Louis Lambert Strether es rescatar al hijo de la señora Newsome de las garras de una malvada mujer, y convencerla para que regrese a su casa en Massachussets. Pero París ha encandilado al muchacho y su retorno a América es algo impensable.

HENRY JAMES

LOS EMBAJADORES

Libro primero

I

Cuando Strether llegó al hotel, su primera pregunta fue acerca de su amigo; no obstante, al enterarse de que Waymarsh no iba a llegar, al parecer, hasta la noche, no se desconcertó del todo. En recepción entregaron al perquiridor un telegrama, con respuesta pagada, en que aquél le encargaba una habitación «siempre que no fuera ruidosa»; de modo que el acuerdo de que se encontrarían en Chester y no en Liverpool seguía teniendo validez hasta el momento. El oculto prurito, empero., que había impelido a Strether a no desear bajo ningún concepto la presencia de Waymarsh en el muelle y que en consecuencia le había llevado a posponer dicha alegría durante unas horas era el mismo que a la sazón le hacía comprender que aún podía esperar sin más contratiempos. En el peor de los casos cenarían juntos y, con todos sus respetos para el querido Waymarsh —ya que no para sí mismo, dadas las circunstancias—, había poco temor de que en lo sucesivo no se vieran con suficiencia. El prurito en activo a que acabo de referirme había sido, por lo que toca al hombre que había desembarcado primero, enteramente instintivo: resultado del insistente presentimiento de que, por agradable que fuese encontrarse, tras separación tan larga, ante su compañero, su tarea consistía sencillamente en preparar un pequeño ardid para que su propia imagen apareciese ante el próximo vapor como la primera «nota», según él, europea. A esto había que añadir ya su certeza de que demostraría, como mucho y de todas todas, dicha nota europea en medida más que suficiente.

Esta nota, mientras tanto —desde la tarde anterior, gracias a este felicísimo dispositivo— le había provocado un sentimiento de libertad personal como no lo había experimentado durante años; un arregostamiento al cambio y a no tener, ante todo y por el momento, nada ni nadie por quien preocuparse, que ya se prometía, si la precipitada esperanza no pecaba de imprudente, solapar su aventura con triunfo imperturbable. Personas hubo en el barco con las que había congeniado fácilmente —en la medida en que podía atribuírsele desenvoltura hasta el momento— y que en su mayor parte se habían perdido en el torrente que fluía desde el desembarcadero hasta Londres; otras le habían pedido que fuera al hotel y hasta habían solicitado su ayuda para visitar las bellezas de Liverpool; pero había declinado todas las ofertas sin excepciones; no había acudido a ninguna cita ni persistido en ninguna relación; había reparado con indiferencia en la cantidad de personas que se consideraban afortunadas, al contrario que él, por el hecho de ser «presentadas»; incluso había dedicado la tarde y la noche a lo inmediato y lo sensitivo, sin incidentes ni reincidencias y por simple y sosegada evasión, solo, con independencia e insociabilidad. Una tarde y una noche en los bancos del Mersey representaban una limitada dosis de Europa, pero por lo menos había aceptado su ración según se había presentado, sin edulcorantes. Había hecho una leve mueca, es cierto, al pensar que Waymarsh podía estar ya en Chester; había considerado que, de tener que dar cuenta de una llegada prematura a Chester, habría sido difícil hacer que el intervalo de espera tuviese un aire particularmente impaciente; pero era como el hombre que, descubriendo con alegría que tiene en el bolsillo más dinero de lo normal, lo manosea un rato y con despreocupación y complacencia lo hace tintinear antes de acometer la empresa de gastarlo. Que estuviera preparado para andarse por las ramas con Waymarsh a propósito de la hora de atracada y que deseara verle con tanta avidez como le regocijaba la dilatación de la demora es probable que fuesen síntomas tempranos de que su relación con su verdadera misión no iba a ser nada sencilla. Tenía que cargar, pobre Strether —mejor habría sido confesarlo al principio—, con la singularidad de una doble conciencia. Había desapego en su celo y curiosidad en su indiferencia.

En cuanto la joven de la ventanilla le hubo entregado por encima del mostrador el papelito rosáceo con

el nombre de su amigo, que pronunció la muchacha, se dio la vuelta para encontrarse en el vestíbulo con una dama que le miró a los ojos como con determinación espontánea y cuyos rasgos-no lozanamente jóvenes, no especialmente delicados, pero expresivos y gratos— recordó como de una visión reciente. Quedaron frente a frente durante un momento; el momento concretó la ocasión en que la viera: le había llamado la atención el día anterior en su hotel precedente, donde —también en el vestíbulo— se encontraba ella charlando con algunos pasajeros de su barco. Entre ambos no había ocurrido nada y, ciertamente, apenas habría sabido especificar la particularidad del rostro femenino que había determinado el presente reconocimiento. Reconocimiento, en cualquier caso, que pareció darse por igual en la mujer y que no hizo sino aumentar el misterio. Sin embargo, lo primero que ella le dijo fue que, habiendo oído su pregunta por casualidad, no había podido menos de inquirir, con su permiso, si podía preguntarle acerca del señor Waymarsh de Milrose, Connecticut; el señor Waymarsh, el abogado norteamericano.

—Ah, sí —repuso él—, mi entrañable amigo. Ha de reunirse conmigo en este lugar, viene de Malvern y yo creía que había llegado ya. Me consuela saber que no le he hecho esperar porque llegará más tarde. ¿Lo conoce usted? —Strether estaba muy nervioso.

No advirtió cuánto habría tenido que atribuir a su reacción hasta después de haber hablado; cuando pareció notificárselo el tono de la réplica femenina, así como el retozo de algo más en su rostro —es decir, de algo más que su incansable perspicacia, al parecer habitual.

—Lo conocí en Milrose, que solía frecuentar hace mucho; teníamos amigos comunes y de hecho estuve en su casa. No sé si me reconocería —prosiguió la interlocutora de Strether—, pero me encantaría verle. —Y añadió—: Tal vez lo haga porque voy a pasar aquí la noche.

Guardó silencio un instante mientras nuestro amigo asimilaba aquellas cosas; fue como si hubiera transcurrido ya un buen rato de conversación. Incluso se sonrieron levemente y Strether acabó por observar que no le cabía ninguna duda de que al señor Waymarsh se le podía ver con toda facilidad. Aquello, sin embargo, pareció afectar a la dama en el sentido de que tal vez pudiera ella haber ido demasiado lejos. Era mujer de una franqueza absoluta.

—¡Oh! —exclamó—. Espero que a él no le importe. —Y en consecuencia observó acto seguido que le parecía que Strether conocía a los Munster; los Munster eran aquellos con quienes él la había visto en Liverpool.

Pero resultó que él no conocía a los Munster lo bastante para que le echaran una mano en aquel caso; así que se los despachó al instante como si en el repertorio de temas prefiriese lo sencillo. La apostilla femenina a la relación mencionada más había suprimido que aportado un tema y al parecer no había nada más a lo que recurrir. La actitud de ambos siguió siendo, pese a todo, la del que no quiere abandonar el repaso del índice; y la consecuencia de esto, a su vez, fue la sensación de que se habían aceptado recíprocamente con una ausencia prácticamente total de preliminares. Recorrieron juntos el vestíbulo y la compañera de Strether observó que el hotel contaba con los encantos de un jardín. Por entonces ya se había dado cuenta él de su extraña inconsecuencia: había eludido las intimaciones del vapor y amortiguado las emociones relativas a Waymarsh para descuidar, en aquel súbito acontecimiento, tanto el retiro como la cautela. Sin subir siquiera a su habitación entró con su nueva amiga en el jardín del hotel y al cabo de diez minutos había convenido en verle otra vez en aquel lugar tan pronto se hubiera arreglado. Quería echar un vistazo a la ciudad y lo harían juntos sin dilación. Se hubiera dicho que la mujer estaba en sus reales y que había recibido al hombre en calidad de huésped. Su conocimiento del lugar la revestía de los atributos de la anfitriona y Strether dirigió una mirada de pesadumbre a la damisela de la ventanilla. Era como si este personaje hubiera sido sustituido de repente.

Cuando bajó al cabo de un cuarto de hora, lo que vio la anfitriona, lo que acaso captara con una óptica bondadosamente compuesta, fue la magra figura, un tanto desenvuelta, de un hombre de mediana estatura y posiblemente rebasando la madurez: un hombre que frisaba la cincuentena y cuyos rasgos más evidentes eran lo atezado y exangüe del rostro, el poblado y oscuro bigote de corte típicamente norteamericano, recio y largo, una cabeza de cabello aún abundante aunque generosamente veteado de gris, y una nariz de insolente y atrevida eminencia, cuyo perfil homogéneo y remate respingón, como podría decirse, producía cierto efecto apaciguador. Unos lentes perennes montados en el fino puente y una hendidura, insólitamente profunda, pertinaz plumazo del tiempo, que seguía la curva del bigote desde la aleta de la nariz hasta la barbilla, tenían un no sé qué que completaba el aparejo facial que un observador atento habría visto catalogado en el acto en la panorámica visual de las personas que complementaba la cita de Strether. Esperábale en el jardín esta persona complementaria, manoseando un par de guantes claros, suaves, elásticos, de singular frescura, y dando muestras de una predisposición aparente mientras él se acercaba por el pequeño cuadro de terso césped y en medio de la húmeda solana inglesa que, tal vez, dada su preparación, más tosca, hubiera señalado él como telón de fondo de una ocasión semejante. Tenía ella, la dama digo, una corrección del todo natural y una idoneidad templadamente expansiva que su acompañante

no pudo analizar, antes bien le chocó de. tal modo que su sensibilidad ante el hecho aumentó sobremanera, como si se tratase de una cualidad totalmente nueva para él. El hombre se detuvo en la hierba antes de llegar hasta la mujer e hizo como que buscaba algo, posiblemente olvidado, en el ligero sobretodo que llevaba en el brazo; sin embargo, lo fundamental del ademán consistía en el deseo de ganar tiempo. Nada más extraño en aquel momento que los sentimientos de Strether, abocado como estaba a algo cuyo sentido casaba mal con la esencia de su pasado y que comenzaba literalmente en aquel momento y lugar. De hecho había empezado ya arriba, delante del espejo que le había reflejado al tiempo que amortiguado, tan peregrinamente, la escasa luz de la ventana de su insípido dormitorio; había comenzado con un repaso de los elementos de la Apariencia, un repaso más minucioso de lo que se sintiera movido a efectuar durante mucho tiempo. En tales circunstancias había creído siempre que dichos elementos no estaban tan de su mano como le hubiera gustado, pero entonces había caído en la cuenta de que se trataba ni más ni menos que de cosas cuya componenda se cifraba presuntivamente en lo que estaba a punto de hacer. Y estaba a punto de ir a Londres, de modo que el sombrero y el lazo podían esperar. Lo que le había venido de lleno como una pelota en una bonita y limpia jugada-y que le había alcanzado, por lo demás, no menos limpiamente— no era otra cosa que el aire, en la persona de su amiga, como de quien ve y selecciona, un aire de poseer sin tapujos todas esas vagas cualidades y cantidades que se le representaban, en conjunto, como el ventajoso anticipo de la oportunidad afortunada. Así como la primera vez que ella le hablara y él respondiera no había habido, pues hay que confesarlo, ni pompa ni ceremonia, Strether habría resumido la impresión que tenía de la mujer diciendo: «Bueno, está educada con más refinamiento». Y si una réplica como «¿Más refinamiento que *quién?»* no aparecía como resultado de su observación, era sólo porque sabía en el fondo a quién se refería el segundo término de la comparación.

En cualquier caso, lo que ella parecía prometer —compatriota y conocida como era, con ese generoso diapasón del compatriota y la relación apresurada, no respecto de ningún misterio, sino tan sólo del querido y dispéptico Waymarshera el entretenimiento que proporcionaba esa educación más refinada. Su detenimiento para el tanteo del sobretodo fue seguramente el detenimiento de la confianza y ello posibilitó que su mirada averiguase tanto, en proporción, como ella había averiguado de él. Parecíale la mujer de una juventud casi insolente; pero unos treinta y cinco bien llevados aún habrían podido dar tal impresión. Ella era, sin embargo, al igual que él, una mujer llamativa y pálida; claro que él no podía saber cuántas cosas en común habría advertido un espectador que los mirase alternativamente. Y no habría sido imposible que un espectador tal supusiese que, siendo ambos de un moreno tan distinguido y de una delgadez tan acusada, manifestando los dos muescas de superficie y defectos en la vista, una nariz desproporcionada y una cabeza discreta o clamorosamente cana, se trataba de hermano y hermana. Admitido esto, habría habido no obstante un resto diferenciador; una hermana de aquel talante habría conocido, sin duda, los extremos de la desemejanza respecto de un hermano de tal suerte, al igual que un hermano de tal enjundia habría experimentado ya, respecto de tal hermana, los extremos de la sorpresa. Por otro lado, no era sorpresa, ciertamente, lo que los ojos de la amiga de Strether manifestaban con mayor ahínco mientras acariciaba sus guantes y concedía al hombre el tiempo que él estimaba oportuno. Aquellos ojos lo habían enfocado directamente, calibrándolo de arriba abajo, como si supieran cómo hacerlo; como si el hombre fuera un material humano que aquellos ojos hubieran manipulado ya. En realidad, hay que decirlo, su propietaria era el ama de llaves de una centena de cubículos o categorías, receptáculos del intelecto, subdivisiones de la conveniencia en que, a tenor de una experiencia pletórica, archivaba a sus congéneres de la especie humana con mano tan resuelta como la del impresor que ordena los tipos. Estaba tan guarnecida en este menester como Strether en el opuesto, por lo que entre ambos se establecía una competencia a la que él habría podido sustraerse de haberla sospechado. Pero se lo recelaba en tan menguada medida que, tras una ofuscación momentánea, guardó la máxima pasividad complacida. A decir verdad intuía bastante lo que ella sabía. Presentía no poco que ella sabía cosas que él ignoraba y, aunque esto era una concesión que, en líneas generales, no solía hacer a las mujeres, la hizo en aquel momento con tan buen humor como si se hubiera quitado un peso de encima. Sus ojos estaban tan tranquilos tras los eternos lentes que habrían podido estar en otra parte sin que se alterase la faz, cuya variabilidad expresiva, así como el sello de su sensibilidad, acostumbraba abrevar en otras fuentes la superficie, la esencia y la forma. Se reunió con su cicerone en un instante y entonces le pareció que ella había aprovechado mejor los momentos recién descritos por haber quedado él tan a merced de la inteligencia femenina. Sabía ella incluso detalles íntimos suyos que el hombre no le había revelado y que tal vez nunca le revelaría. No ignoraba él que le había contado buena cantidad en tan breve tiempo, pero no se trataba de auténticas intimidades. Algunas de éstas, precisamente, eran las que ella sabía ya.

Volvieron a recorrer el vestíbulo del hotel para salir a la calle y fue allí donde en aquel preciso momento la mujer le inspeccionó con una pregunta:

—¿Se ha preocupado de saber mi nombre?

No pudo él reprimir una carcajada.

—¿Se ha preocupado usted de saber el mío?

—Claro que sí, querido amigo: en cuanto usted se marchó. Fui a recepción y lo pregunté. ¿No habría sido mejor que hubiera hecho usted lo mismo?

—¿Averiguar su nombre, cuando la edificante jovencita de allí nos ha visto intercambiar confidencias? —preguntó él.

La mujer echóse a reír al ver el retazo de alarma que cruzaba la despreocupación masculina.

—Razón de más, ¿no le parece? Si teme usted que me perjudique el que me hayan visto pasear con un caballero que aún no sabe quién soy... le aseguro a usted que a mí me preocupa bien poco. No obstante —prosiguió—, aquí tiene mi tarjeta; y como acabo de recordar que aún he de hacer algo en recepción, puede usted examinarla mientras vuelvo.

Una vez tuvo en la mano la pequeña cartulina que la mujer había sacado del monedero, alejóse ésta mientras el hombre sacaba otra semejante para entregarla a su amiga cuando volviera. Leyó pues el sencillo nombre de «María Gostrey» al que se adjuntaba, en un ángulo, un número y el nombre de una calle, de París seguramente, sin otra identificación apreciable que su cualidad extranjera. Guardó la tarjeta en el bolsillo del chaleco, manteniendo la suya a la vista mientras tanto; y al tiempo que se apoyaba en la jamba de la puerta, acogió con la sonrisa del pensamiento errabundo lo que la zona que se extendía ante el hotel ofrecía a sus ojos. Sin duda le hacía mucha gracia que tuviera ya a María Gostrey, fuera ella quien fuese —y, a decir verdad, no tenía la menor idea—, a buen recaudo. Sin saber cómo, estaba seguro de que guardaría con sumo cuidado la pequeña presa que acababa de embolsarse. Miraba con ojos invidentes y cansinos mientras seguía algunas de las implicaciones de su acto, preguntándose si realmente estaba autorizado a calificarlo de desleal. Era precipitado, posiblemente incluso prematuro, y pocas dudas había acerca de la expresión facial que habría provocado en cierta persona la contemplación de aquello. Claro que si se trataba de algo «malo»... bueno, en tal caso mejor habría sido no estrenarse siquiera. A esto, vaya por Dios, había llegado ya, antes incluso de conocer a Waymarsh. Había creído tener un limite, pero el limite había sido rebasado en el curso de treinta y seis horas. Además, una vez que María Gostrey se hubo reunido con él y con un alegre y decisivo «¡Bueno!» le hubo lanzado al mundo, sintió se aún más discutible en un buen trecho del terreno de las costumbres y hasta de la moral. Admitido esto, se sintió afectado por ello mientras paseaba junto a la mujer con el sobretodo de un brazo, la sombrilla bajo el otro, y la tarjeta, un tanto tiesa, sostenida entre índice y pulgar: le afectaba como le afectaba, real y comparativamente, su inserción en la historia. No había habido «Europa» en Liverpool, no —ni siquiera en las deliciosas, impresionantes y terribles calles de la noche anterior— en la medida en que su actual compañera se lo hacía sentir. Y cuando más se lo hizo sentir fue en el momento en que, tras unos minutos de paseo y con tiempo de sobra para preguntarse si un par de miradas femeninas de reojo significaban que sería mejor se calzase los guantes, casi lo hizo detenerse con un divertido desafio:

—Pero ¿por qué no se la guarda? Sin malicia ninguna le digo que cuesta imaginárselo a usted con ella pegada a los dedos. Claro que si le resulta una molestia tenerla consigo, a veces se agradecen las devoluciones. ¡Lo que gasta una en tales adminículos!

Comprendió él entonces que su forma de conducirse con aquel tributo premeditado la había afectado como si se tratase de una desviación en una de esas direcciones que aún no podía calcular, así como entendió que ella creía que aquel emblema era aún el que había recibido de ella. Le tendió la tarjeta en consecuencia, como si se la devolviera, pero tan pronto como la hubo cogido la mujer advirtió la confusión y, con los ojos fijos en ella, se detuvo brevemente para excusarse:

—Me gusta su nombre —apuntó.

—Oh —dijo él—, dudo que le suene de algo. —No obstante, tenía sus motivos para estar seguro de que tal vez sí.

¡Ah, era todo tan evidente! La mujer volvió a leer el nombre como si no lo hubiese hecho hasta entonces.

—Señor Lewis Lambert Strether —deletreó casi con la misma desenvoltura que si se hubiese tratado de un desconocido. Repitió, sin embargo, que le gustaba—; sobre todo el Lewis Lambert. Es el título de una novela de Balzac.

—Ya lo sé —dijo Strether.

—Pero la novela es rematadamente mala.

—También me consta —dijo Strether con una sonrisa. A lo que adjuntó un despropósito que sólo lo fue superficialmente—: Yo soy de Woollett, Massachusetts. —Cosa que, por lo inesperado o por lo que fuese, hizo reír a la mujer. Balzac había descrito muchas ciudades, pero no Woollett, Massachusetts.

—Y lo dice —repuso ella— como si deseara usted que inmediatamente se supiese lo peor.

—Oh, pienso —dijo él— que usted debe haberlo descubierto ya. Lo llevo tan dentro que tiene que

notárseme en el acento y, como se dice allá, incluso en la «positura». No me puedo desprender de ello y estoy seguro de que usted lo supo en cuanto me vio.

—¿Lo peor, dice usted?

—Bueno, el sitio de donde soy. En cualquier caso, ya está dicho; así no podrá aducir, ocurra lo que ocurra, que no he sido franco con usted.

—Comprendo... —la señorita Gostrey parecía seriamente interesada en el detalle que el hombre había destacado—. Pero ¿qué cree usted que va a ocurrir?

Aunque no era tímido —cosa más bien anómala—, Strether apartó la mirada; un gesto que, en las conversaciones, era frecuente en él, a pesar de que sus palabras no solían acusar el efecto.

—Vaya, que usted me encuentre demasiado desesperado.

Tras lo cual siguieron paseando mientras ella respondía que los más «desesperados» de sus paisanos eran precisamente los que más apreciaba. Toda suerte de menudencias —menudencias que a él se le antojaron no obstante mayúsculas— afloró en el aroma de la ocasión; pero nos afecta tanto el vínculo de este momento con asuntos todavía lejanos que se nos permitirá ofrecer más ejemplos. A decir verdad, tal vez lamentáramos descuidar un par de ellos. El muro tortuoso —el cinturón, quebrado de mucho atrás, de la pequeña ciudad hinchada, medio mantenido en su sitio gracias a las meticulosas manos cívicas— discurría, en apretada hilera, entre parapetos desbastados por pacíficas generaciones, deteniéndose aquí y allá en virtud de una puerta desvencijada o un socavón relleno, cuestas y declives, parajes escalonados, giros excéntricos, enlaces sospechosos, atisbos de calles ordinarias y de las cejas de los gabletes, vistas del campanario de la catedral y de los campos ribereños, de la apiñada ciudad inglesa y del ordenado campo de Inglaterra. Tal vez fuese demasiado profundo para expresarlo con palabras el deleite que sentía Strether ante aquellas cosas; y, no obstante, había ciertas imágenes de su retrato interior que se combinaban intensamente con dicho deleite. Había hollado ya aquel camino hacía mucho tiempo, a los veinticinco años; pero semejante circunstancia, en lugar de arruinarlo no hacía sino enriquecerlo en la perspectiva presente y señalar la reafirmación del hombre como evento de sustancialidad suficiente para ser compartida. Con Waymarsh era con quien la habría compartido y, en consecuencia, le dedicó algo que le debía. Miró varias veces el reloj y al llegar a la quinta la señorita Gostrey lo interpeló.

—Está haciendo algo que usted mismo estima incorrecto.

Había dado de tal forma en el clavo que el hombre mudó de color notablemente y lanzó una carcajada casi desagradable.

—¿Hasta ese punto estoy contento?

—En mi opinión, no está contento usted cuanto debiera.

—Comprendo —pareció convenir él pensativamente—. Mi prerrogativa es grande.

—Oh, no es prerrogativa suya. No tiene nada que ver *conmigo.* Sino con usted. Su fracaso es total.

—Ah, vamos, acabáramos —dijo él riendo—. El fracaso de Woollett. *Ese* sí es total.

—A lo que me refiero —se explicó la señorita Gostrey— es a su fracaso en lo que toca a la diversión.

—Precisamente. No es seguro que Woollett contenga probabilidades de diversión. Si las tuviera las acometería. Pero no tiene, pobrecilla —prosiguió Strether—, a nadie que le enseñe cómo obtenerlas. Al contrario que yo. Yo sí tengo a alguien.

Habíanse detenido a la luz del atardecer —haciendo pausas constantes, en su vagabundeo, para mejor aprecio de cuanto veían— y Strether se apoyaba en una de las vetustas y pétreas acanaladuras de la pequeña muralla. Se reclinó en aquel apoyo de cara a la torre de la catedral, dominada en aquel momento a la perfección gracias a la parada de ambos, elevada masa de un rojo parduzco, cuadrada y con adornos secundarios de espirales y crochetes, retocada y restaurada, no obstante encantadora a los ojos masculinos, largo tiempo cerrados, y con las primeras golondrinas del año revoloteando a su alrededor. La señorita Gostrey se apoyó a su lado, inundada de un aura de comprensión del efecto de las cosas, aura cuyo derecho de pertenencia justificaba ella en medida creciente. En esto la mujer estaba bastante de acuerdo.

—Es cierto que tiene usted a alguien-dijo, para añadir—: Quisiera que me hiciera saber usted cómo.

—Oh, le temo a usted —dijo el hombre.

Durante un momento la mujer sondeó al hombre, por entre sus gafas y a través del hombre mismo, con cierta intencionalidad amable.

—¡Ah, vamos, de ningún modo! No me teme usted ni por asomo, a Dios gracias. De ser así no habríamos venido aquí tan pronto, digo yo. —Y añadió con severidad—: Usted confía en mí.

—Creo que tiene usted razón... pero es que es eso precisamente lo que temo. No me importaría si no fuera como digo. Es haber quedado así, en veinte minutos, tan de sopetón en manos de usted. Me atrevería a decir —prosiguió Strether— que es algo a lo que usted está bastante acostumbrada; pero es que nunca me había ocurrido nada tan extraordinario.

Observó al hombre con toda amabilidad.

—Eso significa sencillamente que usted me ha reconocido, lo que es más bien hermoso y singular. Usted ve lo que yo soy. —Como él protestara ante esto, sin embargo, con campechano manoteo, rechazo de cualquier afirmación de aquel tenor, la mujer se explicó con largueza—: Si se limita a seguir el camino emprendido, no tardará en darse cuenta. Mi destino me ha sobrepasado, he sucumbido ante él. Yo soy una guía general... de «Europa», ¿sabe usted? Espero a las personas; las hago circular. Las reúno; las instalo. Soy una especie de agente superior de turismo. Compañera en sentido global. Como le he dicho, distribuyo a las personas. Es algo que no procuro, pero que siempre me sucede. Este ha sido mi destino y el destino propio hay que aceptarlo. Es espantoso tener que decirlo en un mundo tan corrompido, pero creo sinceramente que, tal como usted me ve, no hay nada que yo no sepa. Conozco todas las tiendas, todos los precios... pero conozco cosas todavía peores. Llevo a las espaldas la pesada carga de nuestra conciencia nacional o, en otras palabras, pues de esto se trata, de nuestra misma nación. ¿De qué se compone nuestra nación si no de los hombres y mujeres que pesan sobre mis hombros? Y no lo hago, usted lo sabe bien, por ningún lucro personal. No lo hago, por ejemplo, aunque ciertas personas sí, y esto también lo sabe usted, por dinero.

Lo único que pudo hacer Strether fue escuchar, asombrarse y calibrar sus posibilidades.

—Y sin embargo, relacionada como está con tantos parroquianos, apenas puede decirse que lo hace por amor. —El hombre hizo una pausa—: ¿Cómo la recompensamos?

Sufrió la mujer cierta vacilación, pero acabó por exclamar «¡Usted no tendrá que hacerlo!», por poner al hombre otra vez en movimiento. Aunque durante escasos minutos, siguieron andando y, no obstante abstraído en lo que ella le había dicho, el hombre sacó una vez más el reloj; pero mecánica e inconscientemente y como nervioso por el sólo optimismo producido por lo que a él se le antojaba extraño y cínico ingenio de aquella mujer. Miró la hora sin verla y entonces, a propósito otra vez de algo dicho por su compañera, volvió a detenerse.

—Le tiene usted un miedo atroz.

Sonrió el hombre con una mueca que a él mismo le pareció casi enfermiza.

—¿Entiende ahora por qué le temo a usted?

—¿A causa de esta suerte de clarividencia? Pero, ¡bueno!, si lo hago todo por usted. Es —añadió— lo que le he dicho hace un momento. Y usted se comporta como si esto estuviera mal.

Volvió él a apoyarse y acomodarse, como para oír algo más, en la muralla.

—¡Entonces, libéreme!

El rostro femenino se iluminó a causa de la alegría producida por aquella invocación, pero, como si se tratase de un caso de intervención inmediata, lo consideró abiertamente.

—¿De esperarle? ¿De verle en lo sucesivo?

—Oh, no, eso no —dijo el pobre Strether con aire apesadumbrado—. Tengo que esperarle... y tengo muchas ganas de verle. Me refiero al miedo atroz. Hace unos minutos puso usted el dedo en la llaga. Es una sensación abstracta, pero surte efecto en determinadas ocasiones. Es precisamente lo que me ocurre ahora. Yo siempre estoy pensando en otras cosas; es decir, en cosas distintas al momento presente. La obsesión por lo otro es aterradora. En este momento, por ejemplo, pienso en algo más que en usted.

La mujer escuchaba con encantadora solicitud.

—Oh, no debiera usted hacerlo.

—Estamos de acuerdo, pues. Haga que ello sea imposible.

La mujer recapacitó.

—¿Es de veras una «orden» suya? ¿El que deba hacerme cargo del asunto? ¿Se *rendirá* usted?

El pobre Strether lanzó un suspiro.

—¡Si pudiera! Pero ahí está el meollo... que nunca puedo. No... no puedo.

A pesar de todo, la mujer no se había desanimado.

—Pero, cuando menos, usted lo desea.

—¡Oh, de manera inefable!

—Bueno, entonces, con tal de proponérselo... —Y la mujer se hizo cargo del asunto, según sus propias palabras, en el acto—. Confíe en mí —dijo; y su acción correspondiente fue, mientras desandaban el camino, hacer que el hombre la cogiera del brazo, como una anciana bonachona, subordinada y maternal que desea ser «simpática» con una persona más joven. Si el hombre retiró la mano, como ocurrió, al aproximarse al hotel, ello fue sin duda porque, después de haber hablado un poco más, la diferencia de edad o, cuando menos de experiencia —que, para el caso, ya había hecho intranquilo acto de presencia con alguna libertad— le sentaba como si allí se estuviese dando un reajuste. Tal vez fue, bajo todos los conceptos, una suerte que llegasen a la puerta con suficiente distancia entre ambos. La joven que habían dejado en la ventanilla escrutaba el horizonte como si hubiera ido a esperarles a la entrada. A su lado había una persona igualmente interesada, habida cuenta de su actitud, en el regreso de ambos, el efecto de cuya identificación vino a determinar instantáneamente en Strether otra de esas parades emocionales que ya

hemos tenido ocasión de advertir. Dejó que fuera la señorita Gostrey quien pronunciara el nombre, con el delicado, pletórico envalentonamiento, que casi le aturdió, de su «¡Señor Waymarsh!», de lo que tenía que haber sido —sentía como nunca que su vaga mirada de suspensa bienvenida asimilaba los hechos—, de lo que habría tenido que ser, aunque no para ella, la perdición de Strether. Saltaba ya a la vista, a pesar de la distancia, que el señor Waymarsh, por su parte, no manifestaba la menor alegría.

II

De ningún modo iba a confesar al amigo aquella noche que apenas si sabía nada de ella, deficiencia que Waymarsh, a pesar de los recuerdos espoleados por el contacto, por las insinuaciones, preguntas y alusiones preclaras de la mujer, por la cena compartida a trío en el comedor del hotel y por otro paseo, al que tampoco faltó ella, por la ciudad para admirar la catedral a la luz de la luna; deficiencia, digo, o vacío que el ciudadano de Milrose, no obstante admitir que conocía a los Munster, se sintió incapaz de llenar. No recordaba absolutamente nada a la señorita Gostrey y dos o tres preguntas que ella le formuló acerca de determinados miembros de su círculo tuvieron, según observó Strether, el mismo efecto que él ya experimentara de manera más directa: el de parecer, en primera instancia, que todo conocimiento se ubicaba a la vera de aquella mujer tan original. A él le interesaba, es verdad, determinar los límites de la relación concebible que existía entre su amigo y ella, y lo que particularmente le sorprendió fue que dichos límites se juntaban en el lugar de procedencia de Waymarsh. Añadido esto a su sensación de haber ido un poco lejos con ella, concibió una imagen precoz de un itinerario más reducido. Se había apoderado de él una especie de certidumbre: la convicción de que Waymarsh fracasaría de plano, fuera cual fuese el nivel de intimidad alcanzado, en el intento de sacar partido de ella.

Habían entablado, tras los primeros plácemes cruzados entre los tres, una conversación de unos cinco minutos en el vestíbulo y luego, mientras la señorita Gostrey se alejaba, los dos hombres se habían trasladado al jardín. A su debido momento, Strether acompañó a su amigo a la habitación que le había encargado y que, antes de salir, había revisado con escrupulosidad; lugar donde, al cabo de otra media hora, hubo de dejarlo no menos discretamente. Al dejar su compañia fue derecho a su cuarto, pero con la particularidad, casi inmediata, de intuir que el ámbito de aquel aposento se resentía de su situación. Allí mismo tenía, ante sus propias narices, el primer resultado de sus relaciones. Un lugar que antes le había parecido generosamente grande ahora se le figuraba demasiado pequeño. Lo había esperado con algo que se habría entristecido, casi avergonzado, de no reconocer como emotividad, y no obstante con la suposición tácita, al propio tiempo, de que dicha emoción encontraría remedio en el acontecimiento mismo. Lo verdaderamente extraño era que su sentimiento había crecido; y fue este desasosiego —al que sin duda habría definido al instante con dificultad— el que lo condujo una vez más escaleras abajo para pasear sin rumbo durante unos minutos. Volvió a visitar el jardín; miró en el comedor, vio a la señorita Gostrey escribiendo unas cartas, salió, vagó de aquí para allá, se puso nervioso y se ocupó en matar el tiempo; pero antes de que acabara la noche iba a tener el más íntimo encuentro con su amigo.

Era ya tarde —no lo fue hasta que Strether hubo pasado una hora arriba con él— cuando el hilo discursivo de aquel asunto le permitió arribar a un dudoso descanso. La cena y el subsiguiente paseo a la luz de la luna —un sueño, por lo que a Strether respectaba, de efectos románticos más bien prosaicamente trocado en vulgar extravío de levitas— habían contribuido perceptiblemente y aquella conferencia de medianoche era el resultado de que Waymarsh hubiera encontrado-cuando estuvieron libres, según dijo, de la elegante amiga— el salón de fumadores no del todo de su gusto, pese a desear la cama todavía menos. Su expresión más frecuente era que se conocía a sí mismo y en la presente ocasión la aplicó a la certeza de no conciliar el sueño. Se conocía lo bastante bien para saber que se regalaría con una noche animada a menos que llegase, a modo de preámbulo, a sentirse tan cansado como quería. Si el esfuerzo encaminado a este fin implicaba, hasta una hora avanzada, la compañía de Strether —es decir, si consistía en la disposición de éste a una buena charla—, el caso es que flotaba una sensación de disciplina menor, por lo que respectaba a nuestro amigo, en la imagen que le ofrecía Waymarsh mientras permanecía sentado, en camisa y pantalón, en el borde de la cama. Con las largas piernas estiradas y las anchas espaldas excesivamente combadas, manoseándose alternativamente y durante un espacio de tiempo ya increíblemente duradero, los codos y la barba. Hacía que el visitante se sintiera tan extremada como casi deliberadamente incómodo; sin embargo, ¿qué había sido esto para Strether, desde que vislumbrara al desconcertado amigo en la entrada del hotel, sino la tónica dominante? Se trataba de una incomodidad en cierto modo contagiosa, así como, igualmente en cierto modo, inconsecuente y carente de fundamento; el visitante intuía que si no se hacía a ello —o él o Waymarsh—, representaría una amenaza para su preparada y ya confirmada conciencia de lo agradable. Cuando subieron juntos la primera vez a la habitación que Strether había elegido para Waymarsh, éste la

había revisado en silencio con un suspiro que significaba para el amigo, si no el hábito de la desaprobación, sí al menos la desesperación de la frase oportuna; aquella mirada había sido para Strether como la clave de gran parte de lo que había observado desde entonces. «Europa», se había puesto a conjeturar a partir de tales cosas; había, pues, como si dijéramos fracasado en la entrega de sus mensajes; no había sintonizado el otro con éstos y, al cabo de tres meses, casi había renunciado ya a toda esperanza.

En realidad daba la sensación de insistir en ello con sólo permanecer allí apoltronado con la luz de gas en los ojos. Esto por sí solo conducía la futilidad de la simple rectificación a un fracaso multiforme. Por sí solo y sin saber cómo. Tenía una cabeza grande y hermosa y un semblante ancho, cetrino y arrugado: un conjunto fisonómico chocante, significativo, cuya parte superior, la frente despejada y elegante, el cabello espeso y suelto, los ojos oscuros y fuliginosos, llegaba a recordar una generación cuyo corte se había apartado enormemente de la impresionante imagen, conocida gracias a grabados y bustos, de ciertos eminentes héroes nacionales de la primera mitad del siglo XX. Pertenecía al tipo de personalidad —y esto formaba parte de la energía y esperanzas que Strether había encontrado en él en los viejos tiempos— de los políticos norteamericanos, esos políticos propios de las «salas de Congreso» de antaño. En los últimos tiempos había corrido la especie de que, como la parte inferior de su rostro, que era endeble y un tanto torcida, afeaba la homogeneidad, se había dejado crecer la barba para ocultarla, tal vez afeando más las cosas para los que estaban en el secreto. Gustaba de sacudir la melena; hipnotizaba, con sus ojos admirables, al que le escuchaba u observaba; no usaba gafas y tenía una forma, en parte magnífica, sin embargo también en parte irritante, como de representante a elector, muy intensa de mirar a cuantos se le aproximaban. Saludaba como si el otro hubiera llamado a la puerta y él dispusiera de todos los movimientos. Strether, que no lo había visto durante una temporada, lo apreciaba en aquel momento con cierta virginidad de tacto, y es posible que no le hubiera hecho tanta justicia ideal como en aquella ocasión. La cabeza era mayor, los ojos más nobles de lo preciso en su profesión; aunque aquello, a fin de cuentas, sólo venía a significar que la profesión era expresiva por sí misma. Y lo que expresaba en aquel dormitorio con luz de gas de Chester, a medianoche, era que su objetivo, al cabo de los años, apenas había escapado, mediante una fuga oportuna, al derrumbe general. No obstante, tamaña prueba evidente de su vida intensa, según se entendía en Milrose la vida intensa, habría configurado, en la imaginación de Strether, una especie de elemento en que Waymarsh, con sólo proponérselo, habría flotado con facilidad. Pero, ahí, nada recordaba menos la flotación que la rigidez con que, en el borde de la cama, afirmaba su postura de prolongado deseo de permanencia. Sugería a su camarada algo que siempre, cuando lo afrontaba, llegaba a irritarle: la imagen de una persona acomodada en un vagón de tren e inclinada hacia delante. Representaba la óptica desde la que el pobre Waymarsh iba a sufrir la ordalia de Europa.

Gracias a las tensiones laborales, los compromisos de la profesión, la absorción y las preocupaciones de ambos, ni siquiera habían gozado de un día libre para hablar con intimidad durante los cinco años aproximadamente que habían transcurrido antes de la repentina ruptura de relaciones que casi podía considerarse desconcertante intervalo de comparativo sosiego; hecho que, en cierta medida, explicaba el hincapié con que Strether realzaba casi todas las facciones de su amigo. Las que había perdido de vista desde el primer momento las había recuperado; aquellas otras que no había podido olvidar le chocaban ahora como si conformaran, recompuestas y expectantes, una especie de altanero retrato de familia en la puerta de su casa. La habitación era estrecha a pesar de su longitud y el amigo de Strether tenía tan estirados los pies con calcetines que casi se veía obligado a sortearlos en los constantes movimientos nerviosos que hacía sin despegarse de la silla. Había denotaciones compartidas a propósito de temas de los que hablar y temas de los que no, y uno del segundo grupo, en particular, resaltaba como trazo de tiza en una pizarra. Casado a los treinta años, Waymarsh no vivía con su mujer desde hacía quince y, al resplandor de la luz de gas que mediaba entre ambos, estaba claro como el agua que Strether no iba a preguntar por ella. Sabía que seguían separados y que ella vivía en hoteles, viajaba por Europa, se maquillaba y escribía al marido insultantes epístolas, de ninguna de las cuales, por cierto, privábase la víctima de una atenta lectura; no obstante, respetaba sin dificultades el frío crepúsculo que se había cernido sobre aquella faceta de la vida de su compañero. Era una provincia existencial en donde imperaba el misterio y respecto de la cual Waymarsh aún no había enunciado la menor palabra informativa. Strether, que deseaba para su amigo cumplida justicia doquiera que pudiese, admirábale sobremanera a causa de la dignidad de su reserva y hasta calificaba ésta como una de las bases —bases comprobadas y numeradas todas— para catalogarlo, en el escalafón de la amistad, como un triunfador. Waymarsh era un triunfador a pesar del exceso de trabajo, del abatimiento, del apocamiento manifiesto, de las cartas de su mujer y de su nula afición por Europa. Strether habría estimado menos inútil su propio trabajo si hubiera podido convertirlo en algo tan hermoso como un silencio de tamaña elegancia. Separarse de la señora Waymarsh, era, qué cabe duda, empresa fácil; y, ciertamente, valía la pena pagar con la propia intimidad el estipendio del ideal para ocultar, con semejante actitud, la mofa de haber sido abandonado por ella. El marido había contenido la lengua y

obtenido sobrado beneficio; felices resultados por los que Strether le envidiaba en particular. También nuestro amigo había vivido una circunstancia que callar y que valoraba en mucho; pero se trataba de un asunto de estofa distinta y la cifra del beneficio que había alcanzado no había sido suficientemente elevada para mirar a nadie a la cara.

—Por lo que se me alcanza, no sé para qué lo necesitas. No pareces morirte de ganas por hablar de ello. —Era de Europa de lo que Waymarsh se había decidido a hablar por fin.

—Bueno —dijo Strether, procurando llevar la delantera al máximo—. Me parece que no me muero de ganas ahora que he empezado. Pero tuve que soltar bastante el freno antes de comenzar.

Waymarsh le dedicó una de sus miradas tristes.

—¿No has recuperado aún la normalidad habitual?

Aquello no fue expresamente escéptico, pero en cierto modo era como una súplica que pedía la veracidad más absoluta y que, en proporción, se le antojó a nuestro amigo, con la mismísima voz de Milrose. Hacía tiempo que había establecido una distinción imaginaria —aunque nunca, a decir verdad, hablase atrevido a revelarla— entre la voz de Milrose y la voz de Woollett. Era la primera, según creía, la que estaba más en la verdadera tradición. Había habido ocasiones en su vida en que el sonido de dicha voz lo había sumido en momentánea confusión y, sin saber cómo, por lo que fuese, las presentes circunstancias adoptaron esas mismas características. Y no era cuestión, ni mucho menos, de que aquella precisa confusión le obligase otra vez a buscar evasivas.

—Esas palabras hacen poca justicia a un hombre que tanto se ha beneficiado de verte.

Waymarsh clavó en el trípode y la jofaina la muda e indiferente mirada con que una Milrose personificada, por así decir, habría acusado lo inesperado de un cumplido de Woollett; y Strether, por su lado, se sintió una vez más como un Woollett personificado.

—Quiero decir —prosiguió entonces su amigo— que tu aspecto no es tan malo como otras veces; puede compararse ventajosamente con lo que era la última vez que lo aprecié.

Los ojos de Waymarsh, sin embargo, se negaban a enfocar el aspecto mencionado; era como si obedecieran a un instinto de apropiación; por ello, se produjo un efecto más sensible cuando, sin abandonar la contemplación de la palangana y el jarro, añadió:

—Has engordado un poco desde entonces.

—Me temo que sí —dijo Strether riendo—; se engorda con todo lo que se ingiere y yo he ingerido, me atrevería a decir, más de lo que permite mi capacidad natural. Estaba agotado cuando embarqué.

Aquello sonó con rara nota de buen humor.

—Yo quedé agotado —replicó el compañero— al llegar; ha sido esta persecución del descanso lo que me ha dejado sin fuerzas. La cuestión, Strether, y es un alivio tenerte aquí para que lo oigas, aunque no sé, a fin de cuentas, qué es lo que realmente esperaba, tal y como dije a cuantos me encontraba en el viaje... la cuestión, digo, es que un país como éste no es en modo alguno mi *estilo* de país. No hay un solo país de cuantos he visto hasta el momento que encaje en mi estilo. Bueno, no niego que no haya muchos lugares preciosos y con notables antigüedades; pero el problema radica en que yo no parezco estar a tono con ninguno. Esta es una de las razones, digo yo, por las que he sacado tan poco provecho. No he sentido el menor rastro de la exaltación que era propenso a esperar. —Con aquellas palabras no hizo sino aumentar la seriedad—. ¿Sabes? Tengo ganas de marcharme.

Sus ojos estaban ya totalmente fijos en los de Strether, pues se trataba de uno de esos hombres que miran cara a cara a los demás cuando hablan de sí mismos. Aquel detalle facultó al amigo para mirarle con intensidad y aparecer inmediatamente ante sí mismo, al hacer aquello, en una posición eminentemente ventajosa.

—Un comentario muy ocurrente para espetarlo a un paisano que se ha desplazado con el fin de reunirse contigo.

Nada más elegante en aquel momento que el aire sombrío de Waymarsh.

—¿Has venido adrede?

—En buena medida sí.

—Por tu forma de decírmelo por carta, pensaba que había algo más.

Strether vaciló.

—¿Algo más que mi deseo de reunirme contigo?

—Algo más que tu abatimiento.

Strether, con sonrisa amortiguada por cierto reconocimiento, cabeceó.

—Hay mil motivos para ello.

—¿Ninguno en especial que haya sido tu principal motor?

Nuestro amigo pudo responder por fin concienzudamente.

—Sí. Uno. Hay un asunto que tiene mucho que ver con mi venida.

Waymarsh esperó un poco.

—¿Es demasiado íntimo para revelarlo?

—No, no es demasiado íntimo... para ti. Sólo que es bastante complicado.

—Pues muy bien —dijo Waymarsh, que había estado aguardando nuevamente—. Es posible que este lugar me haga perder los estribos, pero no sé que me haya ocurrido todavía.

—Oh, acabaré contándotelo todo. Pero no esta noche.

Waymarsh pareció ponerse más rígido y hundir más los codos.

—¿Por qué no... ya que no puedo dormir?

—Mi querido amigo, porque yo *sí* puedo.

—¿Dónde está tu abatimiento, entonces?

—Precisamente en eso: en que puedo interponer ocho horas —a lo que añadió que si Waymarsh no se lo «ganaba» era porque no se iba a la cama; resultado de lo cual fue, según el orden de las cosas, que, para no resultar injusto, el segundo dejó que su amigo insistiera en que debía meterse en el lecho. Strether, con un poco de mano coercitiva, le ayudó en la consumación de los procedimientos y volvió a encontrar el papel que le correspondía en aquella relación, propiciamente prolongado por las intrascendentes minucias de reducir el gas de la lámpara y comprobar el suministro de mantas. En cierto sentido le proporcionó la satisfacción de que Waymarsh, que parecía anormalmente grande y negro en la cama, se sintiera tan cuidado como el paciente de un hospital y, con las frazadas hasta la barbilla, igual de simplificado por ello. Se quedó un rato por vaga caridad, en resumidas cuentas, mientras el amigo le provocaba desde el lecho.

—¿De veras está loca por ti? ¿Es eso lo que hay detrás?

Strether sintió un dejo de desasosiego en el sentido tomado de la imaginación del compañero, pero optó por jugar un tanto al desconcierto.

—¿Detrás de mi venida?

—Detrás de tu abatimiento o lo que sea. Ya sabes que es un secreto a voces que va detrás de ti.

El candor de Strether nunca había tenido largo alcance.

—Oh, no me digas que se te ha ocurrido pensar que huyo materialmente de la señora Newsome.

—Bueno, yo sólo parto de lo que eres. Y eres un hombre muy atractivo, Strether. Ya has visto por ti mismo —dijo Waymarsh— el impacto que has causado a la señora de ahí abajo. A menos, claro está-se detuvo como para producir un efecto entre lo irónico y lo nervioso— que seas tú el que anda tras *ella.* ¿Está *aquí* la señora Newsome? —Hablaba de ella con una especie de pavor cómico.

Aquello, aunque más bien brevemente, hizo sonreír a su amigo.

—No, muchacho; está a salvo, gracias a Dios, y esto lo siento cada vez con mayor sinceridad, en su casa. Pensaba venir, pero se echó atrás. En cierto modo, yo he venido en su lugar; y vine, ya que tocamos este asunto, pues no anda desencaminada tu inferencia, por negocios de ella. De modo que, como puedes ver, hay muchos puntos de contacto.

Waymarsh prosiguió para averiguar todo lo que hubiera.

—¿Incluidos los que atañen a la conexión especial a que me he referido?

Strether dio otro paseo por la habitación, dio un toque a la manta de su compañero y acabó por llegarse a la puerta. Sus emociones eran las de la enfermera que se ha ganado un descanso tras haberlo hecho todo ordenadamente.

—Incluidas más cosas de las que puedo pensar en este momento tan poco sólido. Pero no temas: te daré cumplida cuenta de ellas; seguramente te encontrarás con más de las que puedes admitir. Si seguimos viéndonos, te agradeceré infinitamente la opinión que me des respecto de unas cuantas.

La apercepción de Waymarsh del tributo ofrecido fue notoriamente indirecta:

—¿Quieres decir que no crees que vayamos a seguir viéndonos?

—Me limito a no descuidar el peligro —dijo Strether con paternalismo—, porque cuando oí las ganas que tenías de volver me pareció verte abierto a tal posibilidad de locura.

Waymarsh encajó aquello —mudo durante unos instantes— como un niño crecido al que se desaira.

—¿Qué vas a hacer conmigo?

Era la misma pregunta que Strether había formulado a la señorita Gostrey y se preguntó si habría producido la misma impresión en ella. Pero *él,* por lo menos, podía ser más concreto.

—Voy a llevarte a Londres.

—Vamos, si ya he estado en Londres —se quejó Waymarsh con dulzura—. Strether, allí no hago ninguna falta.

—Bueno —dijo Strether de buen humor—, me parece que puedes hacerme falta a mí.

—O sea que tengo que ir.

—Oh, aún tendrás que ir a más sitios.

—Bueno —suspiró Waymarsh—, haz lo que te plazca. Aunque ¿te importaría decirme antes de

llevarme donde sea...?

Nuestro amigo había vuelto a quedar abstraído, tanto por diversión como por arrepentimiento, en la pesquisa de si se habría conducido de aquella manera en su sesión vespertina de atrevimiento; hasta tal punto que por un instante hubo de perder el hilo de la conversación.

—¿Decirte...?

—Vaya, pues lo que te traes entre manos. Strether vaciló.

—Bueno, se trata de un asunto tal que, por más que yo quisiera, no podría ocultarte.

Waymarsh lo escrutó sombríamente.

—¿Y qué significa eso, pues, sino que tu viaje es a causa de ella?

—¿A causa de la señora Newsome? Oh, ya te he dicho que sí. En gran medida.

—Entonces, ¿por qué dices además que es a causa mía? Strether, lleno de impaciencia, trasteó bruscamente la cerradura.

—Es muy sencillo. Es a causa de ambos.

Waymarsh se volvió al cabo con un quejido.

—Bueno, no seré yo quien te case.

—Ni yo a tí tampoco, llegado el caso.

Pero Strether ya se había alejado con una carcajada.

III

Había dicho a la señorita Gostrey que seguramente tomaría, para irse con Waymarsh, un tren de la tarde y, en consecuencia, ya por la mañana parecía que la dama había forjado su propio plan para tomar uno que saliera antes. Había desayunado ya cuando Strether entró en el comedor; pero, como Waymarsh aún no había hecho acto de presencia, tuvo tiempo de recordar a la mujer los términos de su acuerdo y de pedirle que fuera sumamente discreta. Sin duda no iba a desaparecer ella en el preciso momento en que había inspirado un deseo. La había visto cuando ya se levantaba de la pequeña mesa del mirador, lugar donde, con los periódicos de la mañana a su lado, recordó al hombre, según éste hizo saber a la mujer, al Mayor Pendennis cuando desayunaba en el club; cumplido ante el que manifestó ella un profundo agradecimiento; y la retuvo tan implorantemente como si ya hubiese aprendido —sobre todo bajo el influjo de las visiones nocturnas— a no saber hacer nada sin ella. Antes de que se marchara debía ella enseñarle a llevar todo tipo de gestiones, a pedir el desayuno tal y como se pide el desayuno en Europa, y debía asesorarle especialmente en el problema de pedirlo, para Waymarsh. Éste había cargado a su amigo, mediante golpes desesperados en la puerta de su cuarto, con temibles y presumidas responsabilidades relativas a chuletas y naranjas; responsabilidades que la señorita Gostrey hizo suyas con una prontitud de acción que compaginaba con su rápida inteligencia. Antes hubo de desaficionar al expatriado de esas tradiciones comparadas con las cuales las chuletas matutinas no eran sino engendro de una hora, y no se debieron a ella, que echaba mano de algunos recuerdos, los titubeos en la andadura; aunque afirmó con suficiente liberalidad, tras pensarlo un buen rato, que siempre había en tales casos una alternativa entre dos etiquetas opuestas.

—Hay veces en que se tiene que claudicar, compréndame usted.

Habían ido juntos al jardín a esperar el aliño de la carne y Strether la encontraba más sugestiva que nunca.

—Bueno. ¿Qué hay?

—Ha estado a punto de representarles tal complejidad de relaciones, a no ser que estimemos se trata de una simpleza, naturalmente, que la situación *tiene que* llegar a su término por sí misma. Quieren volver.

—Y usted quiere que se vayan —concluyó Strether con alegría.

—Yo siempre quiero que se vayan y me deshago de ellos tan rápidamente como puedo.

—Oh, entiendo: usted los lleva a Liverpool.

—Cualquier puerto es útil en una tormenta. Soy, junto con mis otras funciones, un agente de repatriación. Quiero repoblar nuestro abandonado país. ¿Qué será de él, de lo contrario? Quiero desanimar a los demás.

El cuidado jardincito inglés, en medio de la frescura del día, agradaba a un Strether que gustaba de oír bajo sus pies el crujir de la grava dura y menuda, cohesionada mediante riesgos periódicos, y que poseía un ojo muy perezoso para la intensa blandura del césped y las límpidas curvas de los senderos.

—¿A las demás personas?

—A los demás países. Sí, a las demás personas. Quiero desalentar a los nuestros.

. Strether se quedó asombrado.

—¿Para que no vengan? Entonces, ¿por qué les sale usted al encuentro? De ese modo no parece que vaya a detenerlos.

—Oh, por el momento sería demasiado pedirles que no vengan. Lo que pretendo es que vengan aprisa y se marchen más aprisa aún. Les salgo al encuentro para ayudarles a terminar el viaje cuanto antes y, aunque no les paro los pies, me las ingenio para que lo finiquiten. Este es mi breve sistema; y, por si quiere saberlo —dijo María Gostrey—, mi auténtico secreto, mi misión y utilidad más recónditas. Como habrá comprobado, yo sólo entretengo y apruebo, al parecer; pero lo tengo todo bien calculado y no dejo de mover hilos a escondidas mientras tanto. Probablemente no pueda darle cumplida cuenta de mi fórmula, pero me parece que en la práctica me salgo con la mía. Yo lo devuelvo a usted agotado y usted no puede por menos de quedarse. Después de pasar por mis manos...

—¿Y no volvemos a encontrarnos? —Cuanto más lejos iba ella, más lejos se sentía él capaz de ir—. No es que quiera su fórmula... Ya he intuido su abismo con suficiencia, según le di a entender ayer. ¡Agotado! —repitió el hombre—. Si es así como prepara usted sutilmente mi devolución, le agradezco la advertencia.

Durante un minuto y en medio de tanta amenidad-poesía de artículos arancelarios, pero ante todo, visitantes ya condenados, un rato al consumo— se sonrieron con camaradería confirmada.

—¿Dice usted que es sutil? Yo creo que es una trama bien sencilla. Además, usted es un caso especial.

—Oh, los casos especiales... ¡Qué debilidad! —Cedían progresivamente las resistencias de la mujer a aplazar su viaje y a convenir en acompañar a ambos caballeros en el curso del suyo, si un compartimento propio hacía constar su independencia; no obstante y a pesar de esto, hubo de acontecer que después de la comida ella fuese sola y, tras haber concertado una cita para pasar el día con ella en Londres, los dos amigos demoraron su viaje otra noche. Durante la mañana —transcurrida de una manera que él recordaría en lo sucesivo como verdadera culminación de su goce anticipado, caldeada gracias a los presentimientos y a lo que él habría denominado colapsos— la mujer había arreglado toda suerte de cosas con Strether; y entre ellas que aun cuando no existiera un solo momento de su vida en que ella no fuera «oportuna» en alguna parte, pocas perfidias para con el prójimo había, no obstante, de que ella no se sintiera capaz por el bien de Strether. Le explicó, además, que doquiera que estuviese se encontraba con un cabo suelto del que tirar, un parco entuerto que deshacer, apetitos conocidos al acecho y que se dejaban ver cuando ella pasaba, no obstante susceptibles de ser satisfechos con naderías ocasionales. Una vez aceptó ella el riesgo de la desviación a él impuesta en virtud del insidioso apaño femenino de la comida masculina de la mañana, se convirtió para ella en una cuestión de honor no fracasar, respecto de Waymarsh, en un empresa de mayor relevancia; y su ulterior jactancia ante Strether consistió en que había conseguido que el común amigo lo pasara tan bien —y ello casi sin que Strether supiera por dónde iban los tiros— como el Mayor Pendennis en el Megaterio. Había hecho que desayunara como un caballero y esto no era nada, según aseguraba con energía, ante lo que aún le haría hacer. Le hizo participar en el pausado vagabundeo reiterativo con que, según Strether, el nuevo día se cumplimentaba generosamente; y fue gracias a las artes femeninas por lo que, sin saber cómo, se le ocurrió creer, en las murallas y en los Rows, que se estaba saliendo con la suya.

Los tres pasearon, admiraron el paisaje y cotillearon; por lo menos lo hicieron dos; las circunstancias no produjeron en el tercero, si se miraba bien, más que el elemento del notorio silencio. Dicho elemento, la verdad sea dicha, antojábasele a Strether como atiborrado de audibles rumores, aunque era consciente de la necesidad de tomarlo explícitamente como un signo de grata paz. No habría aspavientos pues esto provocaría rigideces; y sin embargo, no se mostraría excesivamente tácito, ya que esto sugeriría renuncia. El mismo Waymarsh se hizo partícipe de cierto entumecimiento ambiguo que lo mismo habría representado el despuntar de cierta percepción que el desespero de dicha cualidad; y en determinadas ocasiones y en determinados lugares —en que las cejijuntas galerías eran más oscuras, los enfrentados frontones más singulares, las solicitaciones de toda índole más intensas— sorprendíanle los otros dos fijándose atentamente en ciertos objetos de menor interés, fijándose eventualmente incluso en nada discernible, como si condescendiera a una tregua. Cuando tropezaba con la mirada de Strether en tales ocasiones parecía culpable y huidizo, para adoptar inmediatamente un aire de retractación. Nuestro amigo no podía enseñarie las cosas oportunas por miedo de provocar un abandono absoluto y hasta se sintió tentado de enseñarle las inconvenientes para obligarle a disentir con sentido de la victoria. Momentos hubo en que se encontró apocado ante la idea de ejercitarse en la plena dulzura de la gustación del ocio, y otros aún en que se sorprendió como si sus intercambios con la dama que iba a su costado pudieran sentar al tercer miembro del grupo con la misma contundencia que el señor Burchell, en el hogar del Dr. Primrose, se dejaba influir por los altos vuelos de los visitantes de Londres. Las minucias le llamaban la atención y le divertían tanto que casi se disculpaba a cada momento y, a modo de explicación, volvía a pedir perdón por una sonrisa recién emitida. Al mismo tiempo sabía perfectamente que su sonrisa había valido tanto como nada ante la de Waymarsh y confesaba una y otra vez que, para compensar su frivolidad, hacía lo que podía por sus anteriores virtudes.

Como fuera, sin embargo, las precitadas virtudes estaban todavía allí y parecía poco menos que magnífico observar a aquel hombre desde los escaparates de tiendas que no eran como las tiendas de Woollett, poco menos que magnífico hacer que deseara cosas con las que no sabía qué hacer. Precisamente aquello, merced a la más singular y menos admisible de las leyes, le desanimaba en aquel momento; y el cariz atrevido que tomaba hacía que aumentase el número de sus deseos. Se trataba de esos primeros paseos por Europa que de hecho consistían en una especie de insinuación delicadamente extraña de lo que uno podía encontrarse al final del proceso. ¿Habría vuelto, al cabo de muchos años, en lo que pudiera calificarse de otoño de la vida, sólo para enfrentarse a ello? De cualquier modo, lo que le hizo sentirse más libre con Waymarsh estaba más allá de los escaparates de las tiendas; aunque habría sido más cómodo que este último no se rindiese con tanta notoriedad al atractivo de los trueques meramente útiles. Escrutaba con su sombría imparcialidad el vidrio cilindrado de las quincallerías y los talabarteros, mientras Strether se pavoneaba de su afinidad con los tratantes en papel de cartas timbrado y en corbatas. En realidad, Strether se comportaba siempre como un desvergonzado ante los sastres, aunque era precisamente con el sastre agachado junto a él cuando su paisano manifestaba más altanería. Circunstancia que dio a la señorita Gostrey una oportunidad a contrapelo de respaldar a Waymarsh a su costa. El abatido abogado —se trataba de algo inconfundible— tenía su concepción del vestir, pero esto, a la luz de algunas características del efecto producido, era ni más ni menos lo que volvía peligrosa la insistencia al respecto. Strether se preguntó si el otro consideraría a la sazón menos elegante a la señorita Gostrey o más de buen tono a Lambert Strether; pues era probable que la mayor parte de las observaciones intercambiadas por los dos últimos a propósito de viandantes, rostros y tipos humanos ejemplificase, en su rango, la disposición a hablar según hablaba la «sociedad».

¿De veras le ocurría aquello en aquel momento? ¿De veras había sucedido? ¿Era cierto que una mujer de buen tono lo introducía en volandas en la sociedad mientras un viejo amigo, abandonado en el umbral, se quedaba observando el ímpetu de la corriente? Cuando la mujer de buen tono dejó que Strether —como mucho, mientras se lo permitió— comprase un par de guantes, los argumentos esgrimidos por ella, la prohibición de las corbatas hasta que ella pudiese conducirle por la Burlington Arcade, fueron tales que habríanse colado en un oído sensible como provocaciones a las imputaciones injustas. La señorita Gostrey era mujer de tono tan excelente que podía concertar una cita en la Burlington Arcade sin necesidad del vulgar recurso de un guiño. De este modo, las sencillas disposiciones a propósito de un par de guantes pudieron representar, en todo caso —mientras no se abandonase la hipótesis de los oídos sensibles—, posibilidades de algo que Strether sólo podía barruntar como peligro de aparente licencia. Consideraba a su nueva amiga, por lo que se refería a su compañia compartida, casi casi como habría considerado a un jesuita con faldas: un representante de los intereses proselitistas de la Iglesia Católica. La Iglesia Católica —es decir, el enemigo, el monstruo de ojos saltones y omnipresentes, inquietos y tanteadores tentáculos— era para Waymarsh ni más ni menos que la sociedad, ni más ni menos que la multiplicación de consignas bíblicas, ni más ni menos que la discriminación de tipos y tonos, ni más ni menos que los inicuos y viejos Rows de Chester, a tono con el feudalismo; ni más ni menos, en suma, que Europa.

No faltó luz aclaradora, sin embargo, en un incidente que ocurrió poco antes de que volvieran para comer. Waymarsh se había mantenido durante un cuarto de hora excepcionalmente callado y distante y algo —Strether no pudo saber nunca de qué se trataba— tal vez excesivo, para el caso, vino a sucederle cuando sus acompañantes llevaban ya tres minutos de confusión apoyados en el viejo pretil que protegía el borde del Row, vista callejera singularmente tortuosa y apiñada. Pensó Strether: «nos considera sofisticados, nos toma por mundanos, nos tiene por perversos, piensa de nosotros las cosas más extrañas»; pues eran asombrosas las inconcretas cantidades que nuestro amigo, en el curso de un par de breves días, había adquirido el hábito de agrupar concluyentemente y con sentido de la conveniencia. Pareció darse, además, una relación directa entre una inferencia de este tenor y la repentina y porfiada carrera que emprendió Waymarsh en sentido opuesto. El movimiento fue sorprendentemente brusco y sus compañeros supusieron al principio que había visto y seguido a continuación a un conocido. Pero no tardaron en descubrir que una puerta abierta le había recibido al instante y comprobaron que lo había engullido el establecimiento de un joyero, tras cuya vistosa fachada se había perdido de vista. Como fuera, el gesto tuvo la connotación de una evidencia y permitió que los otros dos pusieran una cara muy próxima al miedo. La señorita Gostrey, sin embargo rompió a reír.

—¿Qué le habrá ocurrido?

—Pues que no puede soportarlo —dijo Strether.

—¿Qué es lo que no puede soportar?

—Nada. Europa.

—Entonces, ¿de qué manera le ayudará el joyero?

A Strether le pareció descubrirlo, desde su posición, entre los intersticios de relojes alineados, de

baratijas que colgaban libremente.

—Ya lo verá.

—Oh, eso es precisamente lo que me temo, si es que compra algo; que pueda ver algo más bien espantoso.

Strether analizó las probabilidades más sutiles.

—Es posible que lo compre todo.

—¿No le parece que en ese caso debemos ir tras él?

—Por nada en el mundo. Además, no podemos. Estamos paralizados. Nos miramos largamente con ojos asustados; temblamos visiblemente. La cosa es, y comprenda lo que le digo, que nosotros «comprendemos». Y él ha ido en busca de libertad.

La mujer se asombró, pero lanzó una carcajada.

—¡Pues a qué precio! Y yo que le preparaba algo barato.

—No, no —prosiguió Strether, sinceramente divertido a la sazón—, no diga eso: el tipo de libertad con que usted negocia es muy caro. —Luego, como para justificarse—: ¿Acaso no lo estoy sufriendo a mi modo? Se trata de esto.

—¿Se refiere usted a estar aquí conmigo?

—Sí, y a hablarle como lo hago. A usted la conozco desde hace unas pocas horas y a él le conozco de toda la vida; así que si la soltura con que trato con usted a propósito de él no es extraordinaria —retuvo y acarició la idea unos instantes—, vaya, entonces es más bien infame.

—¡Es extraordinaria! —dijo la señorita Gostrey para poner punto final a aquello—. Y usted debería saber-añadióla soltura con que yo trato, y que ante todo pretendo tratar, al señor Waymarsh.

Strether caviló.

—¿A propósito de mí? Ah, pero no es lo mismo. La equivalencia se daría si Waymarsh pusiera a mi servicio el implacable análisis que pudiera hacer de mí. Y nunca hará una cosa así —lo veía con triste claridad—. Nunca me analizará sin remordimientos. —Casi contuvo a la mujer con el peso de lo que acababa de decir—. Nunca le dirá una sola palabra de mí.

La mujer lo comprendió; fue ecuánime en esto; pero al cabo de un instante, su intelecto, su inagotable ironía, se sirvió del dato.

—Claro que no. ¿Para qué va a relacionarse una con personas capaces de hablar de lo que sea, capaces de hacer análisis sin remordimientos? No hay muchos como usted y yo. Será que él es demasiado estúpido.

Aquellas palabras agitaron en el amigo una reacción escéptica que fue al mismo tiempo la protesta de una fe de años.

—¿Waymarsh estúpido?

—En comparación con usted.

Strether seguía mirando la fachada de la joyera y aguardó un momento antes de contestar.

—Ha triunfado de un modo que yo no podría ni soñar.

—¿Se refiere usted a que ha hecho dinero?

—Lo hace, según creo. En cuanto a mí —dijo Strether—, aunque con una espalda tan curvada, jamás he hecho nada. Soy un fracaso total con piernas.

Temió durante un instante que ella le preguntase si quería decir que era pobre; y se alegró de que la mujer no lo hiciera porque, en realidad, ignoraba a qué la habría impelido la verdad sobre punto tan desagradable. Lo único que hizo, sin embargo, fue confirmar su aseveración.

—Gracias a Dios que es usted un fracaso. ¡Por eso me he fijado en usted! Las demás cosas de actualidad son demasiado innobles. Mire a su alrededor, fíjese en los triunfadores. ¿Me juraría por su honor que le gustaría ser uno? Es más, fíjese —prosiguió ella— en mí.

En consecuencia, se miraron a los ojos durante unos instantes.

—Entiendo —replicó Strether—. Usted es uno de ellos.

—La superioridad que usted distingue en mí —dijo la mujer— revela mi inutilidad. Si usted conociera —suspiró— los sueños de mi juventud. Pero son nuestras realidades las que nos han reunido. Somos compañeros de armas derrotados.

El hombre le dedicó una sonrisa de afecto no pequeño, pero cabeceó.

—Ello no altera el hecho de que sea usted muy cara. Me ha costado ya...

Pero se había quedado sin habla.

—¿Qué le he costado?

—Bueno, mi pasado... en inmenso amasijo. Pero no importa —se echó a reír—; pagará hasta el último céntimo.

La atención de la mujer se había fijado, no obstante, en el regreso del compañero, ya que Waymarsh se hizo visible al salir de la tienda.

—Espero que él no haya pagado —dijo ella— con su último céntimo; aunque estoy convencida de que habrá sido generoso y ello por usted.

—Ah, no, ¡eso no! —¿Por mí entonces?

—Tampoco. —Waymarsh estaba ya lo bastante cerca para emitir signos legibles por su amigo, aunque, deliberadamente, parecía no fijarse en nada en particular.

—¿Por él mismo, pues?

—Por nadie. Por nada. Por la libertad.

—Pero ¿qué tiene que ver con esto la libertad?

La respuesta de Strether fue indirecta.

—Que es tan bueno como usted y como yo. Pero de otro modo.

La mujer había tenido tiempo de escrutar el rostro del amigo que se acercaba; y al hacerlo, como aquellas cosas eran fáciles para ella, lo comprendió todo.

—Sí, de otro modo. Pero mejor.

Si Waymarsh estaba taciturno también estaba, a decir verdad, más o menos abstraído. No les dijo una sola palabra, no explicó su ausencia, y aunque los otros dos estaban convencidos de que había hecho una adquisición extraordinaria jamás llegaron a saber su naturaleza. Se limitó a mirar con ceño olímpico la cúspide de los envejecidos gabletes.

—Es la ira de los justos —había tenido tiempo de decir Strether; y esta ira de los justos fue a convertirse entre ambos, de común acuerdo, en la descripción de una de sus periódicas necesidades. Fue Strether quien con el tiempo sostuvo que esto le hacía mejor que ellos. Pero por entonces la señorita Gostrey estaba convencida de que no quería ser mejor que Strether.

Libro segundo

I

Las ocasiones que tendría Strether de ver relumbrar la ira de los justos en relación con el exilio de Milrose habían de tener, sin lugar a dudas, su oportuna periodicidad; pero mientras tanto nuestro amigo tendría que dedicarse a otros menesteres. En ningún atardecer de su existencia, quizá, según meditaba, había tenido que dar tanto de sí como en el tercero de su corta estancia londinense; un atardecer pasado junto a la señorita Gostrey en un teatro al que habíase sentido transportado sin alzar siquiera la mano y en virtud de la simple manifestación de un meticuloso prodigio. Conocía ella su propio teatro, conocía su propia obra al igual que había conocido triunfalmente y durante tres días todo lo demás, y el momento saturó a su compañero de esa aprensión de lo interesante que, fuera o no interesante, daba la casualidad de que se filtraba a través del cicerone con faldas, y a la sazón tensábase hasta el limite de la párvula oportunidad masculina. Waymarsh no había ido con ellos; había visto piezas teatrales c'e sobra, dio a entender, antes de que Strether se reuniera con él: afirmación que hubo de pesar lo suyo cuando el amigo descubrió mediante preguntas que había visto dos y un espectáculo circense. Preguntas respecto de lo que había visto que despertaron en él, ni que decir tiene, un efecto menos favorable en realidad que las concernientes a lo que no había visto. Quería que se pusiera de manifiesto lo primero; pero ¿cómo hacerlo, quiso saber Strether de su habitual consejera, sin poner de manifiesto lo segundo?

La señorita Gostrey había cenado con él en el hotel, frente a frente en una mesa de reducidas dimensiones en que los iluminados candelabros arrojaban matices rosáceos; y los matices rosáceos, la mesa de reducidas dimensiones y el suave perfume de la dama —¿habría habido alguna vez algo tan suave a su sencilla percepción sensorial?— constaban de tantas pinceladas que el hombre apenas si se percataba de lo sublime del retrato. El había ido al teatro en Boston, incluso a la ópera, con la señora Newsome, y había sido más que mera escolta para aquella mujer; pero no se había dado ninguna breve cena cara a cara, ninguna luz color de rosa, ningún soplo de vaga dulzura a modo de prolegómenos: una de las consecuencias de este hecho era que, en el momento presente, apaciblemente pesaroso, aunque con tacto aguzado, se preguntaba a sí mismo el *porqué* de aquellas aúsencias. Era más o menos la misma diferencia que apreciaba en la notable condición de la compañera, cuyo vestido estaba «cortado», pues tal se le figuraba el término preciso, con relación a la espalda y la pechera, de una manera muy distinta que el de la señora Newsome, y que lucía alrededor del cuello una ancha cinta de terciopelo rojo, con un broche antiguo —estaba casi complacidamente seguro de que era antiguo— prendido de la parte delantera. El vestido de la señora Newsome nunca había sido «cortado» de ninguna manera y jamás había llevado en torno del cuello una

cinta de terciopelo rojo; además, de haberse dado estas cosas, ¿habrían servido alguna vez para forjar y complicar tanto su visión, según parecíale sentir en aquellos instantes?

Habría sido absurdo de su parte rastrear las ramificaciones del efecto de la cinta que sustentaba el dije de la señorita Gostrey si, dadas las circunstancias, no hubiera sido el hombre tan dado a las percepciones ingobernadas. ¿Qué era esto, si no una percepción ingobernada, que la cinta de terciopelo de la amiga añadía, sin saber cómo, a su fisonomía y al valor individual de cada uno de los restantes detalles, el de la sonrisa y la forma de mantener la cabeza, el del porte, el de los labios, los dientes, los ojos, el cabello? Pues a decir verdad, ¿qué tenía que ver un hombre consciente de la labor masculina en el mundo con las cintas de terciopelo rojo? Por nada en el mundo se habría descubierto él diciendo a la señorita Gostrey lo mucho que le gustaba la suya; y, sin embargo, no sólo se había sorprendido a sí mismo en el acto —frívolo, sin lugar a dudas, ridículo, y ante todo inesperado— de la gustación, sino que, además, había tomado a éste como punto de partida de jugosas visiones retrospectivas, avanzadillas no menos jugosas y fugas laterales. La forma en que el cuello de la señora Newsome estuviera abrazado representósele de pronto, dentro de un orden extraño, casi coincidente en muchas zonas de su amplio espectro con la forma en que lo estaba el de la señorita Gostrey. La señora Newsome llevaba en sus horas operísticas un vestido negro de seda —muy bonito, el hombre sabía que era «bonito»— y un ornato que su memoria pudo identificar como una lechuguilla. Había establecido una asociación con la lechuguilla, ciertamente, por más que fuese casi imperfectamente romántico. Había dicho en cierta ocasión a quien la vestía —y fue una observación tan «libre» como las que siempre le había hecho— que se asemejaba, con aquella golilla y otras prendas, a la reina Isabel; y a decir verdad había sido una posterior fantasía suya el que, a modo de consecuencia de semejante ternura y de tamaña asunción de la imagen, la forma de su especial homenaje a los «arrequives» se fuese hinchando poco a poco hasta volverse notoria. La hilación, sentado allí con la imaginación vagabunda, vino a representársele como levemente conmovedora; pero, con todo, pues conmovedora era sin duda, dadas las circunstancias, era lo mejor que podía haber sido. Había existido con toda seguridad y a pesar de los pesares; pues antojábasele en aquel momento que ningún caballero de Woollett de su edad se habría atrevido a establecer una similitud de aquel tenor respecto de una dama de la edad de la señora Newsome, que no estaba muy por debajo de la suya.

De hecho se le ocurrió toda clase de cosas, al parecer, en aquel momento, comparativamente pocas de las cuales puede su cronista aspirar a mencionar a causa del espacio. Se le ocurrió, por ejemplo, que la señorita Gostrey semejábase tal vez a María Estúardo; Lambert Strether poseía tal franqueza de fantasía que podía detenerse un gratificado momento en una antítesis como ésta. Se le ocurrió que en ninguna ocasión anterior —literalmente nunca— había cenado con él una dama en un lugar público antes de ir al teatro. Lo público del sitio era, precisamente, en aquel asunto y según Strether, lo raro y lo extraño; le afectaba casi como la obtención de la intimidad acaso hubiera afectado a un hombre de otras experiencias. Se había casado, allá en años lejanos, _tan jóvenes como para haber descuidado llevar a las muchachas al Museo, en Boston; y era completamente cierto en su caso que —aun después de cerrarse el período de consciente despreocupación que copaba el ámbito de su vida, el grisáceo páramo de las dos muertes, la de su mujer y la de su hijo, diez años después— nunca había llevado a nadie a sitio alguno. Y se le ocurrió particularmente —aunque la amonestación ya había sonado, chisporroteando a intervalos, bajo otras formas — que el negocio que había emprendido no le había devuelto al hogar, pese a todo, sino por la presencia de las personas que le rodeaban. La mujer, su amiga, dábale una impresión, al principio, más pura de lo que él captara por su cuenta-y se la daba sencillamente, diciendo con inspiración informal: «Oh, sí, son prototipos»—, pero una vez que la hubo asimilado procuró servirse de ella al máximo tanto mientras guardaba silencio durante los cuatro actos como cuando hablaba en los intervalos. Se trataba de una noche, un mundo de prototipos y de una sarta de hilaciones, en primer lugar, en que los cuerpos y las caras de las butacas podían cambiarse por los del escenario.

Le parecía que la obra que se representaba se introducía en él con el codo desnudo de su vecina de asiento, una dama hermosa, pelirroja y casi desnuda que conversaba con un caballero, sentado a su otro lado, sirviéndose de bisílabos aislados que, por el fenómeno más extraño del mundo, tenían tanto significado a sus oídos que se preguntó si no lo habrían agotado por completo, y se percató, merced a la misma ley, más allá de las candilejas, de lo que tomó con gusto por la verdadera plenitud de la vida inglesa. Sufría palpitaciones repentinas en que no habría asegurado si eran los actores o el público los más sinceros, y cuya consecuencia era, cada vez, la apercepción de nuevos contactos. No obstante, enfocado su cometido, se trataba de «prototipos» a los que tendría que abordar. Los que tenía ante sí y a su alrededor no eran como los tipos humanos de Woollett, donde, para el caso, comenzaba a creer que no había más que el masculino y el femenino. Y éstos no sumaban allí más que dos, para ser exactos, aun contando con las variaciones individuales. En el lugar en que se encontraba, por otro lado, aparte de la escala —que sería mayor o menorpersonal y sexual, se había dado, como fuera, desde el exterior, toda una serie de

sobresalientes características; características con que jugaba su observación lo mismo que, ante una vitrina, habría pasado de medalla en medalla y del cobre al oro. Precisamente acontecía en la obra teatral que una mujer perversa con vestido amarillo hacía sufrir los más espantosos trabajos a un joven apacible, enfermizo y guapo que vestía perenne traje de etiqueta. Strether, en términos generales, no sentía miedo del vestido amarillo, pero sí se sintió vagamente nervioso a causa de la inasible compasión que descubrió volcaba sobre la víctima de aquél. No había sido, según recordaba, demasiado amable, o, mejor aún, no había sido de ningún modo amable con Chadwick Newsome. ¿También Chad vestiría constantemente de etiqueta? De algún modo lo esperaba, y esto pareció sumarse a la docilidad general de aquel joven; aunque también se preguntó si, para combatirle con armas propias, él (pensamiento casi estremecedor) tendría que ser igual. Además, el joven habría sido mucho más fácil de manejar —al menos para *él*— de lo que parecía probable respecto de Chad.

Se le ocurrió charlando con la señorita Gostrey que había cosas de las que tal vez hubiese oído hablar, a fin de cuentas; y ella admitió, bajo una leve presión, que nunca estaba del todo segura, a propósito de cosas oídas, de distinguirlas de las que, en ocasiones como la presente, no eran sino extravagantes fantasías.

—Pues me parece, dada la libertad ambiente, compréndame, haber fantaseado con el señor Chad. Es un joven sobre el que se han depositado en Woollett grandes esperanzas, a quien vino a atenazar una mujer malvada y a quien su familia de ultramar ha enviado a usted para que lo libere. Y usted ha aceptado la misión de apartarlo de la mujer malvada. ¿Está usted totalmente seguro de que es muy mala con él?

Algo en los modales masculinos lo reveló con una especie de contención.

—Naturalmente que lo estamos. ¿No lo estaría *usted?*

—Oh, lo ignoro. Nunca se sabe. ¿no cree?, de antemano. Sólo se puede juzgar sobre los hechos. Los de ustedes me son totalmente desconocidos; en última instancia, como usted comprenderá, no dispongo de ellos; por tanto tiene que ser tremendamente interesante saberlos por mediación de usted. Si no le molesta, es cuanto se le pide. Claro está, si usted está seguro de estar seguro: seguro que no es así.

—¿Que él llevara una vida así? ¡Por supuesto!

—Oh, entiéndame, yo no sé nada de su vida; usted no me ha contado su vida. Puede que ella sea encantadora... ¡la vida del hombre!

—¿Encantadora? —Strether miró frente a sí—. Es una mujer vil, venal, de la calle.

—Entiendo. ¿Y *él?*

—¿Chad? Un muchacho infeliz.

—¿De qué tipo es y cuál es su carácter? —prosiguió ella, como Strether vacilara.

—Bueno... es obstinado. —Por un momento fue como si hubiera estado dispuesto a decir más y acto seguido se hubiera controlado. No era esto todo lo que ella deseaba.

—¿Le es simpático?

Aquella vez no hubo demoras.

—No. ¿Por qué?

—¿Lo dice porque está a su cargo?

—Pienso en su madre —dijo Strether pasado un momento—. El chico ha ensombrecido la admirable vida de esta mujer. —Lo decía con severidad—. La tiene medio muerta de dolor.

—Oh, eso es odioso, naturalmente —dijo ella e hizo una pausa como para acentuar más aún esta verdad, pero prosiguió con tono distinto—: ¿Es muy admirable la vida de esa mujer?

—Extraordinariamente.

Lo dijo con acento tan sobrecargado que la señorita Gostrey tuvo que dedicar otra pausa a su apreciación.

—¿Y él solamente la tiene a *ella?* No digo la mala mujer de París —añadió rápidamente—, porque le aseguro a usted que ni siquiera en el mejor de los casos estaría yo dispuesta a concederle más de una. Lo que le pregunto es si tiene sólo a su madre.

—Tiene también una hermana, mayor que él y ya casada; las dos son mujeres notablemente delicadas.

—¿Muy hermosas, dice usted?

Esta urgencia o, casi como él habría dicho, esta precipitación, le indujo a un breve tropiezo, pero se recuperó al instante.

—Me parece que la señora Newsome es una mujer hermosa, aunque, por supuesto, no se encuentra con un hijo de veintiocho años y una hija de treinta, en la flor de la vida. Y eso que se casó muy joven.

—¿Y es maravillosa —preguntó la señorita Gostrey— a pesar de su edad?

A Strether le pareció que se sentía un tanto inquieto ante aquel acoso.

—Yo no digo que sea maravillosa. Mejor aún —añadió inmediatamente—, digo que sí. Porque eso es lo que es ella: maravillosa. Pero no pensaba en su aspecto —se explicó—, por más que sea sorprendente, sin lugar a dudas. Pensaba... bueno, en muchas otras cosas. —Pareció concentrarse en ellas como si fuera a

citar alguna; luego, conteniéndose, abordó otro tema—. Puede que no se piense lo mismo de la señora Pocock.

—¿Es así como se llama la hija? ¿Pocock?

—Así es como se llama la hija —confesó Strether con energía.

—¿Y dice usted que tal vez no se piense lo mismo de su belleza?

—De todo.

—Pero ¿la admira usted?

Dedicó a su amiga una mirada como diciéndole que no podía soportar aquello.

—Me temo que le tengo un poco de miedo.

—Oh —exclamó la señorita Gostrey—, puedo verla desde aquí. Es posible que usted diga luego que la veo con precipitación y en la distancia, pero ya le he demostrado que sé hacerlo. De todos modos —prosiguió—, ¿constituyen toda la familia el joven y las dos damas?

—Totalmente. El padre murió hace diez años y no hay ningún hermano ni más hermanas. Son, en efecto —dijo Strether—, lo único que él tiene en el mundo.

—¿Harta usted cualquier cosa por *ellas?*

El hombre volvió a removerse; la mujer había hecho un hincapié afirmativo tal vez excesivo para los nervios del hombre.

—Oh, no lo sé.

—Lo haría sin lugar a dudas y el «cualquier cosa» que harían ellas se encuentra en su *posibilitación* de que lo haga usted.

—Vamos, ellas no habrían podido venir: ninguna de las dos. Son personas muy atareadas y la señora Newsome, particularmente, lleva una vida muy intensa. Además, es muy nerviosa, no resiste mucho.

—¿Quiere usted decir que es una pobre inválida?

El hombre precisó con meticulosidad:

—Lo que menos le gusta es que la llamen de ese modo. Lo que ocurre es que está delicada, es sensible, muy excitable. Pone tanto de sí misma en todas las cosas...

Ah, María no ignoraba aquello.

—¿Que ya no le queda nada para ninguna otra? Naturalmente que no. A quién se lo dice usted. ¿Excitable? ¿Acaso no me paso la existencia poniendo en movimiento a todo el mundo? Además, creo entender cómo se ha hablado de usted.

Strether hizo caso omiso de aquello.

—Oh, yo también contribuyo al movimiento.

—Muy bien —replicó ella con lucidez—, a partir de este momento debemos afrontarlo juntos con todas nuestras fuerzas. —Y dio un paso más sin abandonar el tema—: ¿Tienen dinero?

Pero fue como si, al tiempo que la férrea imagen femenina seguía acorralándolo, la pregunta hubiera quedado demasiado corta.

—La señora Newsome —explicó él por propio deseo— carece, por otro lado, de la valentía de usted en cuestiones de contactos personales. Si hubiera venido habría sido para entrevistarse con la encausada.

—¿Con la mujer? Oh, no es pequeña valentía.

—No... es exaltación, que es bien distinto. La valentía —deslizó, empero, de muy buena gana— es lo que *usted* posee.

La mujer cabeceó.

—Según usted sólo para sostenerme... para cubrir la desnudez de mi carencia de exaltación. No tengo ni la una ni la otra. Me limito a vapulear la indiferencia. Comprendo lo que quiere usted decir —prosiguió la señorita Gostrey—: que si su amiga hubiera venido habría adoptado grandes miras y que las grandes miras, por decirlo llana y simplemente, la habrían sobrepasado.

Strether meditó divertido la idea que tenía la mujer de lo llano y lo simple, pero siguió el sistema femenino:

—Todo es excesivo para ella.

—Ah, entonces un servicio como el de usted...

—¿Es más por ella que por los demás? Sí... mucho más. Pero mientras no me sobrepase a mí...

—¿No importa su situación? Claro que no. Dejemos estar su situación; es decir, démosla por supuesta. Creo hacerme cargo de ella si la sitúo, la situación digo, por detrás y por debajo de usted; y no obstante la entiendo al mismo tiempo como puntal del estímulo de usted.

—Oh, claro que me estimula —dijo Strether riendo.

—Entonces, como su estímulo me estimula *a mí,* no se necesita nada más. —Con lo que volvió a formular la misma pregunta de antes—: ¿Tiene dinero la señora Newsome?

El hombre prestó atención aquella vez.

—Sí, mucho. Ahí se encuentra la raíz del mal. Hay mucho dinero en este asunto. Chad ha gozado de la libertad de servirse de él a manos llenas. Pero si se modera y vuelve a casa, con todo, dispondrá de cierta participación.

La mujer había escuchado con sumo interés.

—Y yo espero que por su bien disponga usted de la suya.

—Se hará cargo de su concreta recompensa material —dijo Strether sin apercibirse—. Se encuentra en un momento decisivo. Ahora puede entrar en el negocio... no puede demorarse.

—¿Hay un negocio?

—Santo Dios, sí lo hay: un negocio enorme, jugoso y seguro. Un buen negocio.

—¿Un establecimiento importante?

—Sí, una fábrica; una gran industria, de mucha producción. Se trata de una empresa manufacturera, con una producción que, con que sólo reciba una atención adecuada, puede convertirse perfectamente en monopolio. Es un poco que lo hacen mejor, según parece, de lo que otros pueden o de lo que otros, en cualquier caso, hacen. El señor Newsome, hombre de ideas, al menos en este sentido particular —se explicó Strether—, las puso en práctica con gran acierto y dio a la zona, en su momento, un empuje considerable.

—¿Abarca entonces un buen territorio?

—Comprende un vasto número de edificios; casi casi una pequeña barriada industrial. Pero ante todo hay que tener en cuenta el *quid.* El artículo que producen.

—¿Y cuál es el artículo que producen?

Strether miró a su alrededor como con cierta resistencia a decirlo; en aquel momento, el telón, que estaba a punto de alzarse, acudió en su ayuda.

—Se lo diré en el próximo entreacto. —Pero cuando llegó el siguiente entreacto sólo dijo que se lo comunicaría después, después que hubieran salido del teatro; pues ella había vuelto inmediatamente a su tema y a los ojos masculinos la imagen del escenario había sufrido la superposición de otra. Las posposiciones del hombre, sin embargo, hicieron que la mujer preguntase si el producto en cuestión era de índole inconfesable. Y ella misma matizó su calificación diciendo que quería decir inadecuado, ridículo o equívoco. Pero Strether, llegados a este punto, pudo dar satisfacción a la mujer.

—¿Inconfesable? De ningún modo, no paramos de hablar de él; lo conocemos a la perfección y hasta con cínica franqueza. Sólo que, como utensilio doméstico trivial, pequeño, hasta ridículo y de lo más común, está un poco falto de... ¿cómo le diría? Bueno, de dignidad, o, si no, de cierta distinción. Claro que, aquí, con toda la magnificencia que nos rodea... —por decirlo en pocas palabras, Strether se acobardó.

—¿Es de falso prestigio?

—Lamentablemente. Es vulgar.

—Pero seguro que no es más vulgar que esto. —Y a continuación, tras preguntar él como ella misma había hecho—: Que todo lo que nos rodea. —La mujer pareció un tanto irritada—. ¿Cómo considera usted todo esto?

—Vaya, pues en comparación... ¡divino!

—¿Este horroroso teatro de Londres? Imposible, si es que de veras quiere saberlo.

—Oh, en ese caso —dijo Strether riendo—, no quiero saberlo de veras.

Hubo una pausa que la mujer, aún hechizada por el misterio de lo que se producía en Woollett, no tardó en romper:

—¿Digamos ridículo? ¿Pinzas? ¿Bicarbonato? ¿Crema de zapatos?

Aquellas palabras hicieron que el hombre se volviera. —No... ni siquiera está caliente. Mire, no creo que llegue a adivinarlo.

—Entonces ¿cómo podré juzgar su vulgaridad?

—Ya la juzgará cuando se lo diga —y la convenció de que tuviera paciencia. Pero en este momento puede decirse con toda franqueza que el hombre, en consecuencia, no pensaba revelárselo. Porque realmente jamás se lo dijo; y además, ocurrió de manera singular que, por ley femenina de lo incalculable, el deseo de información que sentía la mujer acabó por declinar y su actitud ante la cuestión se trocó en provechoso cultivo de ignorancia. En la ignorancia podía ella alimentar su fantasía y esto demostró ser una libertad útil. Podía tratar las menudencias sin nombre como abiertamente inmencionables y podía hacer la común abstención terriblemente definida. A decir verdad, Strether pudo haberlo presagiado en lo que la mujer dijo a continuación.

—¿Se debe quizá a que sea tan malo, a que su industria, como usted dice, sea tan vulgar... el que el señor Chad no haya regresado? ¿Intuye este hombre la mácula? ¿Se mantiene lejos para no mezclarse en ello?

—Oh —exclamó Strether riendo—, no parece, ¿verdad?, que él esté para intuir «máculas». A él le complace sobradamente el dinero que obtiene gracias a ello y el dinero es todo su apoyo. Hay cierto tacto

en esto... me refiero a la pensión que hasta el momento le tiene asignada su madre. Ella dispone, obviamente, de la facultad de cortar esta pensión; pero aunque así fuera, el joven tiene, por desgracia, y en cantidad no despreciable, su sostén independiente gracias al dinero que le dejó su abuelo, el padre de ella.

—¿No se le facilita, entonces, la independencia —preguntó la señorita Gostrey— justamente por el detalle que acaba de mencionar? ¿No se muestra acaso molesto respecto de su fuente, fuente aparente y pública, de ingresos?

Strether pudo sopesar la insinuación con bastante buen humor.

—El origen de la riqueza del abuelo, y por tanto de la participación de nuestro hombre en ella, no fue precisamente noble.

—¿Qué origen fue ése?

Strether titubeó.

—Bueno... asuntos.

—¿Negocios? ¿Infamias? ¿Tal vez fue un estafador a la antigua?

—Vamos —dijo Strether con más hincapié que convencimiento—, no pienso hacer su retrato ni contar sus proezas.

—¡Señor, cuánto abismo insondable! ¿Y qué me dice del finado señor Newsome?

—¿Qué ocurre con él?

—¿Fue igual que el abuelo?

—No... él estaba más allá de lo que pasaba en la casa. Y era distinto.

La señorita Gostrey insistió:

—¿Mejor?

Su amigo demoró unos instantes la respuesta:

—No.

El comentario femenino al titubeo del hombre no fue menos notorio por inexpresado.

—Gracias. ¿No se da cuenta ahora —prosiguió— del motivo por el que el muchacho no vuelve a casa? Está purgando su vergüenza.

—¿Su vergüenza? ¿Qué vergüenza?

—¿Que qué vergüenza? *Comment donc? La* vergüenza.

—Pero ¿dónde y cuándo —preguntó Strether— se dá *«la* vergüenza», la vergüenza que sea, en la actualidad? Los hombres de que he hablado... hicieron lo que hicieron; y, aparte de que es agua pasada, todo es cuestión de opiniones.

La mujer dio a entender su manera de comprender las cosas:

—¿Ha opinado ya la señora Newsome?

—Oh, yo no puedo hablar por *ella.*

—En el meollo de tales sucesos y, si no le he comprendido mal, beneficiada por ellos, ¿ha conservado por lo menos la exquisitez?

—Oh, no puedo hablar de ella —dijo Strether.

—Yo pensaba que ella era precisamente de quien usted *podía* hablar. *No* confía usted en mí —afirmó la señorita Gostrey al cabo de un momento.

Aquello surtió efecto.

—Bueno, su dinero se gasta, su vida está formada y se ha realizado con mucho sentido de la caridad...

—¿Es ésa una forma de expiar los errores? Es gracioso —añadió antes de que el hombre tomara la palabra— lo intensamente que me hace usted comprenderla.

—Que usted la comprenda —repuso Strether—, he aquí lo único que hace falta.

Ella, sin embargo, no pareció abandonar su punto de vista.

—Lo sé. Ella, a pesar de todo, es distinguida.

Por lo menos, aquello animó al hombre.

—¿Qué quiere decir con «todo»?

—Bueno, me refiero *a usted.* -Con lo que la mujer dio un brusco cambio de conversación—. Dice usted que el negocio necesita atención; ¿no lo cuida, quizá, la señora Newsome?

—Lo atiende lo que puede. Es maravillosamente hábil, pero no es asunto que case con ella y está muy atareada. Tiene muchas, muchas cosas que hacer.

—¿Usted también?

—Oh, sí, yo también tengo muchas, si lo desea.

—Entiendo. Pero a lo que me refiero es —rectificó la señorita Gostrey— a si usted también atiende el negocio.

—Oh, no, yo no toco el negocio.

—¿Pero sí todo lo demás?

—Bueno, sí... alguna que otra cosilla.

—¿Como por ejemplo...?

Strether recapacitó con meticulosidad.

—Bueno, la Gaceta.

—¿La Gaceta? ¿Tienen ustedes una Gaceta?

—Naturalmente, Woollett tiene una Gaceta, que la señora Newsome, mayoritariamente, financia con magnificencia y que yo, con no tanta magnificencia, dirijo. Mi nombre aparece en la portada —prosiguió Strether— y me siento de veras disgustado y herido de que usted, por lo que parece, no haya oído hablar de ella.

La mujer se desentendió durante un momento de aquel motivo de queja.

—¿Y qué clase de. Gaceta es?

La serenidad del hombre no quedó del todo restaurada.

—Bueno, es verde.

—¿Se refiere usted a su color político, como dicen aquí, a sus ideas?

—No; quiero decir que la portada es verde... del matiz verde más adorable que hay.

—¿Y figura también el nombre de la señora Newsome? El hombre vaciló.

—Oh, en cuanto a eso, sin duda cree usted que ella está siempre vigilando. Se encuentra detrás de todo, pero tiene una delicadeza y una discreción...

La señorita Gostrey lo comprendió todo.

—No me cabe la menor duda. *Tiene* que poseer esas cualidades. No la subestimo. Debe de ser un pez gordo.

—Oh, sí, es más bien un pez gordo.

—Un pez gordo de Woollett... *bon!* Me gusta la idea de un pez gordo de Woollett. Y usted debe de serlo también, ya que anda en tantos tratos con ella.

—Eso no —dijo Strether—, no es así como funciona. Pero la mujer ya lo tenía cercado.

—Su modalidad de funcionamiento... ¡no me lo diga!, es, naturalmente, que usted se oculta con discreción tras ella.

—¿Con mi nombre en la portada? —replicó él, certero.

—Vamos, usted no lo ha puesto ahí por voluntad propia.

—Le ruego me excuse, pero eso es exactamente lo que hago. Es, con toda precisión, lo único que hago por mí mismo. ¿Sabe?, parece que rescata un tanto del naufragio de esperanzas y ambiciones, del vertedero de las desilusiones y los fracasos, mi único pedacito presentable de identidad.

Al oír aquello, la mujer lo miró como si fuera a decirle muchas cosas; pero lo que dijo al cabo fue:

—A ella le gusta verlo. Usted es el pez gordo de los dos —añadió en seguida— porque piensa que no lo es. Ella cree que ella sí lo es. No obstante, ella piensa que usted lo es también. Y usted es, en todo caso, el mayor que ella puede retener. —La mujer florecía, rebosaba—. No lo digo para entrometerme entre ustedes, pero el día que ella atrape a uno mayor... —Strether había echado atrás la cabeza como con silenciosa alegría a raíz de algo que le había impresionado en la audacia o la felicidad de las palabras femeninas; mientras tanto, el vuelo de la mujer había ascendido considerablementeEn consecuencia, enfréntese con ella.

—¿Que me enfrente con ella? —preguntó él, sin que ella perdiera la serenidad.

—Antes de perder su oportunidad.

Dicho aquello, los ojos de ambos se encontraron un instante.

—¿Qué entiende usted por enfrentamiento?

—¿Y qué entiendo yo por oportunidad suya? Se lo diré cuando usted me cuente todo lo que se ha callado. ¿Es éste el *mayor* capricho de esta mujer? —añadió repentinamente.

—¿La Gaceta? —Pareció preguntarse cómo la describiría mejor. Pero de las cavilaciones no surgió, sin embargo, más que un croquis—. Es su tributo a lo ideal.

—Entiendo. Están ustedes embarcados en aventuras asombrosas.

—Estamos embarcados en la vertiente impopular... es decir, en la medida en que nos atrevemos.

—¿Y hasta dónde se han atrevido ustedes?

—Bueno, ella hasta muy lejos. Por lo que a mí respecta, bastante menos. Empiezo a no tener su fe. Ella aporta —dijo Strether— las tres cuartas partes. Y, según le he confiado, aporta también *todo* el dinero.

Aquello evocó una imagen relativa al oro que permaneció durante unos segundos en los ojos de la señorita Gostrey, que daba la sensación de estar oyendo algún amontonamiento de coruscantes dólares.

—Espero entonces que haga usted algo bueno...

—¡Nunca he hecho nada bueno! —respondió el hombre con prontitud.

La mujer se limitó a esperar.

—¿No cree que es buena cosa ser amado?

—Oh, no se nos ama. Ni siquiera se nos odia. Sencillamente se nos ignora con toda amabilidad. La mujer hizo otra pausa.

—No confía usted en mí —repitió.

—¿No se revela el verdadero secreto de la prisión cuando se alza el último velo?

Sus miradas volvieron a encontrarse, pero con el resultado de que, transcurrido un instante, la de la mujer se apartó con impaciencia.

—¿No claudica usted? Oh, me alegro de *ello.* -Luego de lo cual, sin embargo, y antes de que él pudiera despegar los labios, añadió—: Ella no es más que un pez gordo *moral.*

El hombre aceptó la definición con regocijo.

—Sí... me parece que esa expresión le hace justicia.

Pero había despertado en su amiga una relación de lo más curioso.

—¿Cómo se acicala el cabello?

El hombre lanzó una carcajada.

—¡Soberbiamente!

—Ay, qué poco informativo es eso. Pero no importa, lo sé. Es limpio hasta lo imponente, un verdadero reproche; notablemente espeso y todavía sin el menor rastro de plata. ¡Ya está!

El hombre se ruborizó a causa del realismo de la mujer, pero se quedó boquiabierto ante su exactitud.

—Es usted el mismo demonio.

—¿Y qué otra cosa *debiera* ser? Cuando lo asalté a usted lo hice como el mismo demonio. Pero no se deje atribular por ello, ya que todo salvo el demonio, a nuestra edad, es aburrimiento y engaño, y ni siquiera él, al fin y al cabo, conserva sino una alegría a medias. —Dicho esto, con un único movimiento rítmico, añadió—: Usted la ayuda en su expiación... lo que tiene que ser violento, porque usted no ha pecado.

—Es ella la que no ha pecado —replicó Strether—. Yo soy el que ha pecado más.

—Ah —exclamó la señorita Gostrey riendo con sarcasmo—, ¡qué imagen me da de *ella!* ¿Ha robado usted a la viuda y a la huérfana?

—He pecado con suficiencia —dijo Strether.

—¿Para quién esa suficiencia? ¿Y para qué?

—Bueno, para estar donde estoy.

—Gracias. —Fueron interrumpidos en aquel momento porque un caballero que había estado ausente durante parte de la representación volvía para ver el final y se deslizaba entre las rodillas de los dos amigos y el respaldo de los asientos de delante; pero la interrupción dio a la señorita Gostrey, antes del subsiguiente silencio, la oportunidad de manifestar, a modo de repentina conclusión, su opinión moral de toda la charla—. Ya sabía yo que se guardaba usted algo. —Esta conclusión, sin embargo, los dejó a su vez, al final de la representación, tan dispuestos a no moverse como si aún tuvieran muchas cosas que decirse; en consecuencia no tuvieron inconveniente en permitir que los demás les adelantaran, ya que habían depositado ciertos intereses en la espera. En el vestíbulo descubrieron que la noche se había vuelto lluviosa; sin embargo, la señorita Gostrey hizo saber a su amigo que éste no conocería la casa de la mujer. Iba a limitarse a dejarla en un coche; le gustaba tanto, en las húmedas noches londinenses y tras una velada de excitantes satisfacciones, ir pensando en las cosas mientras regresaba en la soledad de un coche. Era ésta su gran oportunidad, le dijo con confianza, para reflexionar. Los retrasos causados por el temporal y las pugnas por conseguir coche en la puerta les dio ocasión de apoltronarse en un diván situado al fondo del vestíbulo y al abrigo del viento racheado, húmedo y fresco, de la calle. En aquel lugar, la compañera de Strether reanudó el espontáneo enfoque del tema al que tanto debía ya la imaginación masculina.

—¿Hace en París lo que usted su joven amigo?

Después del largo intervalo, aquello estuvo a punto de sobresaltarle.

—Oh, espero que no. ¿Por qué iba a hacerlo?

—¿Y por qué no? —replicó la señorita Gostrey—. El que usted haya venido por su causa no exige que tenga que haber relación ninguna con ello.

—Usted comprende estas cosas —dijo él a la sazón— mejor que yo.

—Pues claro que lo comprendo *a usted* en ello.

—En consecuencia, penetra usted más en mí...

—¿Que usted mismo? Es muy probable. Eso es siempre prerrogativa de uno. De lo que yo hablo —se explicó la mujer— es del posible y especial efecto de su *milieu* sobre él.

—Ah, su *milieu.* -Strether acabó por darse cuenta de que a la sazón podía representarse las cosas mejor que tres horas antes.

—¿Ha querido decir usted que no puede ser otra cosa que amenazador?

—Ese es justamente mi punto de vista.

—Sí, pero usted parte de muy atrás. ¿Qué dicen sus cartas?

—Nada. Nos ignora... o prescinde de nosotros. No escribe.

—Entiendo. Pero, de todos modos —prosiguió la mujer—, hay dos cosas bien precisas que, dado el maravilloso lugar en que se encuentra, pueden haberle ocurrido. Una es la perversión. La otra, el refinamiento.

Strether se quedó de una pieza: aquello era una novedad.

—¿Refinamiento?

—Oh —dijo ella sin perder la calma—, hay más de un refinamiento.

Aquello hizo que, tras dedicarle una mirada, prorrumpiera

en carcajadas.

— *¡Usted* los conoce!

—Si lo consideramos uno de los síntomas —continuó la mujer en el mismo tono—, constituyen tal vez lo peor.

Meditó el hombre aquello y volvió a adoptar un aspecto grave.

—¿Es propio del refinamiento no contestar a las cartas de su madre?

La mujer titubeó.

—Oh, me atrevería a decir que el mayor de todos.

—Bueno —dijo Strether—, *me* alegro muchísimo de que, en tanto que uno de los síntomas, pase por lo peor el que, según tengo entendido, crea que puede hacer conmigo lo que le venga en gana.

Aquello pareció sorprenderla.

—¿Cómo lo sabe usted?

—Oh, lo sé y basta. Lo siento en las entrañas.

—¿Que él *puede* hacerlo?

—Que cree que puede. Las cosas podrían confundirse —dijo Strether riendo.

Ella, a pesar de todo, no estuvo de acuerdo.

—Respecto de usted, nada podrá confundirse con nada. —Y entendió que podía ir derecha al grano—. ¿Quiere decir usted que si él empeorase volvería para hacerse cargo de los asuntos de su casa?

—Estoy convencido. Volverá porque dispone de una oportunidad muy especial: una oportunidad ante la que cualquier joven educado con propiedad saltaría de gozo. El negocio se ha desarrollado de tal modo que una iniciativa que apenas si existía hace tres años, pero que su padre se encargó de posibilitar con ciertas condiciones, a lo que hay que añadir que Chad dispone por su lado de grandes beneficios contingentes... esta iniciativa, digo, dadas ya las condiciones, sencillamente le espeta con los brazos abiertos. Es su madre quien se la ha guardado, defendiéndola contra viento y marea hasta el último momento. Es necesario, claro está, ya que conlleva un sustancioso «lote», una estupenda participación en los beneficios, que se encuentre al pie del cañón y se dedique al máximo. A eso me refiero cuando hablo de su oportunidad. Si hace caso omiso de esta cuestión, como usted ya sabe, su venida no servirá para nada. Y, para decirlo pronto y bien, voy en su busca para cuidar de que no olvide dicho detalle.

La mujer esperó a que aquellas palabras hubieran surtido su efecto.

—O sea que usted va en su busca para prestarle un inmenso servicio.

El pobre Strether estaba deseando que se enfocara de aquella manera.

—Bueno, si quiere verlo así...

—Si obtiene un resultado favorable, nuestro joven tendrá, como suele decirse, mucho que ganar...

—Oh, en efecto, mucho que ganar —dijo Strether, que había tenido la frase en la punta de la lengua.

—Cosa por la que usted entiende, es obvio, mucho dinero.

—Bueno, no sólo eso. También tengo echado el ojo a otros asuntos. Reputación, tranquilidad, seguridad... el sosiego de encontrarse anclado por una férrea cadena. Él quiere protección, según mi modo de ver. Protección respecto de la vida, quiero decir.

—¡Ah, *voilà!* -su expresión se acompañó de un chasquido de la lengua—. Respecto de la vida. Lo que usted quiere *realmente* es que vuelva a casa para concertarle un matrimonio.

—Bueno, así es.

—Naturalmente —dijo ella—, es rudimentario. Pero ¿con alguien en particular?

El hombre sonrió al oír aquello y pareció concentrarse más en la conversación.

—Usted acaba por saberlo todo.

Sus miradas volvieron a encontrarse durante un segundo.

—¡Pero si es usted quien me lo cuenta todo!

Admitió él el homenaje, diciéndole:

—Con Mamie Pocock.

La mujer quedó pasmada; luego, con toda serenidad, incluso con exquisitez, como si estuvieran previstas todas las extrañezas:

—¿Su propia sobrina?

—Oh, no debe usted simplificar el parentesco. Es la hermana de su cuñado. La cuñada de la señora Jim.

Aquello pareció surtir en la señorita Gostrey un efecto ligeramente endurecedor.

—¿Y quién narices es la señora Jim?

—La hermana de Chad, de soltera Sarah Newsome. Está casada, ¿no se lo he dicho?, con Jim Pocock.

—Ah, sí —respondió ella reservadamente; ¡es que había dicho él unas cosas...! Luego, pese a todo, con la mayor lógica del mundo—: ¿Quién narices es Jim Pocock? —preguntó.

—Bueno, pues el marido de Sally. Es la única forma que tenemos en Woollett para distinguir a las personas —explicó él de buen humor.

—¿Y es una gran distinción... ser el marido de Sally?

El hombre meditó.

—Creo que no cabe otra mayor... a menos que nos fijemos en la que, en el futuro, quepa a la mujer de Chad.

—¿Y cómo le distinguen a *usted?*

—No lo hacen... salvo, tal y como le he dicho, por la portada verde.

Sus miradas volvieron a encontrarse y la mujer se la sostuvo durante unos momentos.

—Ni la portada verde ni ninguna otra van a servirle conmigo. ¡Está usted ahíto de duplicidades! —No obstante, y como tenía por el mango la sartén de la verdad, perdonó aquello—. ¿Mamie es un gran *parti?*

—Oh, el mejor que tenemos: es nuestra chica más guapa e ingeniosa.

La señorita Gostrey pareció conjurar a la pobre criatura.

—Conozco al dedillo lo que *pueden* ser. ¿Con dinero?

—Tal vez no mucho, pero con tanta abundancia en otras cosas que no paramos mientes en ello. No nos fijamos excesivamente en el dinero, ¿sabe usted? —añadió Strether—, por regla general, de las muchachas norteamericanas.

—No —admitió ella—; pero si sé lo que a veces se tiene en cuenta. ¿También usted la admira? —preguntó.

Fue una pregunta, según señaló él, que podía enfocarse desde varios puntos de vista; al cabo de unos instantes, empero, el hombre optó por la vertiente desenfadada.

—¿Acaso no le he demostrado con suficiencia de qué forma admiro yo *a todas* las chicas guapas?

El interés femenino en el problema del hombre era tal, sin embargo, en aquel momento, que apenas si podía librarse de él; de modo que se ciñó a los hechos.

—Supongo que en Woollett querría usted que se mantuvieran, ¿cómo le diría?... intachables. Hablo de los jóvenes respecto de las chicas guapas.

—No había entendido otra cosa —confesó Strether—. Pero parece usted descuidar un dato curioso: Woollett se ha acomodado excesivamente al espíritu de la época y a la creciente blandura de modales. Todo cambia, pero yo sostengo que nuestra situación se ha convertido precisamente en un hito. *Querríamos* que fueran intachables, pero tenemos que contentarnos con lo que son. Puesto que el espíritu de los tiempos y la creciente tibieza de modalas los conduce tantas veces a París...

—Ha de aceptarlos tal como vienen. Cuando vengan. *Bon!* -Nuevamente se hizo cargo de todo la mujer, pero se mantuvo meditabunda durante unos instantes—. ¡Pobre Chad!

—Vamos —dijo Strether cariñosamente—, ¡Mamie lo salvará!

Miraba ella a otra parte, sumida aún en sus visiones, y replicó con impaciencia y casi como si él no la hubiera entendido.

—Usted lo salvará. Nadie más lo salvará.

—Oh, pero con la ayuda de Mamie. A menos que usted quiera decir —añadió el hombre— que conseguirá mucho más con la ayuda de usted.

Por lo menos consiguió con aquello que la mujer volviera a mirarle.

—Usted hará muchas más cosas, pues es usted mucho mejor, que todos nosotros juntos.

—Creo que soy mejor desde el preciso momento en que la he conocido a usted —replicó Strether con valentía.

La soledad del lugar, la reducción del gentío y la retirada ya comparativamente tranquila de sus últimos componentes los habían acercado a la puerta y puéstolos en relación con un mozo al que el hombre pidió un coche para la señorita Gostrey. Aquello, no obstante, les llevó otros pocos minutos que a las claras no iba a desaprovechar ella en modo alguno.

—Me ha hablado usted de lo que, por medio del feliz término de su misión, puede ganar el señor Chad. Pero no me ha hablado de los beneficios que obtendrá usted.

—Oh, yo ya no tengo nada que ganar —dijo Strether con extrema sencillez.

Y ella consideró que la sencillez era excesiva.

—¿Quiere decir que ya lo ha conseguido todo? ¿Que se le ha pagado por anticipado?

—Por favor, no hablemos de pagos —murmuró él.

Hubo algo en el tono de aquellas palabras que contuvo a la mujer, pero como el mozo no había vuelto aún, disponía de otra oportunidad, de modo que formuló la pregunta de otra manera.

—Y si fracasa, ¿qué perderá usted?

No obstante, el hombre no estaba dispuesto a aquello.

—¡Nada! —exclamó y, como apareciera el mozo en aquel momento, pudo ahogar el tema en el movimiento que emprendieron a modo de respuesta. Cuando hubieron dado unos cuantos pasos por la calzada y, bajo una farola, la hubo acomodado en el coche y ella le preguntó si no había pedido para sí ningún otro vehículo, el hombre respondió antes de que ella cerrase la puerta—: ¿Me permitiría ir con usted?

—De ningún modo.

—Entonces iré andando.

—¿Bajo la lluvia?

—Me gusta la lluvia —dijo Strether—. ¡Buenas noches!

Lo retuvo unos instantes, la mano del hombre aún en la portezuela, pero sin responderle nada; pasado ese instante, la mujer contestó repitiendo una pregunta anterior:

—¿Qué tiene usted que perder?

Por qué le afectó la pregunta en aquel momento es algo que él no habría sabido decir; lo único que pudo hacer fue afrontarla de otra manera:

—Todo.

—Es lo que yo pensaba. No le quepa duda de que tendrá éxito. Y mientras llega ese resultado, yo estaré a su disposición...

—¡Ah, mi querida señora! —suspiró el hombre con ternura.

—¡Hasta la muerte! —dijo María Gostrey—. Buenas noches.

II

En su segunda mañana parisina, Strether visitó a los banqueros de la Rue Scribe, a quienes iba dirigida su carta de crédito, e hizo esta visita acompañado de Waymarsh, en cuya compañía había llegado de Londres dos días antes. Se habían dirigido sin dilación a la Rue Scribe al día siguiente de su llegada, pero en aquel momento aún no disponía de las cartas cuya esperanza espoleaba la misión. De hecho no había recibido ninguna; no las había esperado en Londres, pero había contado con algunas en París y, a la sazón, desconcertado, había vuelto al Boulevard con una desazón que, en el momento presente, juzgaba tan buen principio como cualquier otro. Aquella espuela del espíritu le sería útil, se dijo mientras, detenido al final de la calle, recorría con la mirada la gran avenida extranjera; le sería útil para comenzar las negociaciones. Se proponía iniciar éstas inmediatamente, y pasó el resto del día considerando que dicho comienzo le esperaba. Fue poco lo que hizo hasta la noche, salvo preguntarse lo que haría si, por fortuna, no hubiera tenido tanto que hacer; pero se planteó la pregunta relacionándola con situaciones y contactos diferentes. Lo que lo condujo allá y acullá fue la admirable teoría de que nada de cuanto pudiera hacer dejaría de estar de alguna manera relacionado con lo que, fundamentalmente, se llevaba entre manos o sería —en caso de sentir algún escrúpulo— malgastado en el esfuerzo. De hecho tenía escrúpulos: escrúpulos relativos a no dar ningún paso definido hasta hacerse, con las cartas; pero este razonamiento acabó con ellos. Un solo día para recorrer las calles —cosas que solamente había podido hacer en Chester y en Londres— no era demasiado, según estimaba; y teniendo, como a menudo había manifestado íntimamente, todo París por delante, ocupó aquellas horas de lozana lucidez en hacer planes. El tiempo se fue dilatando progresivamente, aunque esto fue lo mejor que pudo haber ocurrido, de haber tenido que ocurrir alguna cosa, en definitiva, y no se abandonó a sí mismo sino hasta la caída de la noche, en el teatro, y, ya de regreso, después de la función, a lo largo del Boulevard, atestado de gente y bien iluminado, para experimentar el auge de aquella dilatación. Waymarsh le había acompañado esta vez a ver la obra y los dos hombres habían paseado juntos, como en una primera etapa, desde el Gimnasio hasta el Café Riche, en cuya congestionada «terraza» habían buscado acomodo apretado —ya que la noche, o más bien la madrugada, porque había pasado la medianoche, era apacible y nada desierta— en procura de solaz. Waymarsh, a consecuencia de una discusión con su amigo, había convertido su necesidad de irse sin demora en una virtud nada despreciable; y en la media hora transcurrida ante las aguadas cervezas habían flotado elementos sensibles que habíanle dado ocasión de

comunicar que mantendría su compromiso con su yo inflexible hasta las últimas consecuencias. Y lo dio a entender —pues era, a fin de cuentas, su yo inflexible lo que se nublaba bajo las luces de la terraza— con imperturbable silencio: hubo, ciertamente, grandes dosis de silencio crítico, en todos los sentidos, entre ambos compañeros, incluso cuando llegaron a la Place de l'Opéra, en lo tocante al carácter de aquel peregrinaje nocturno.

Tuvo correspondencia por la mañana: las cartas habían llegado a Londres, todas juntas al parecer, el día en que Strether estaba de viaje, y habían necesitado su tiempo para seguirle; así que, tras un domeñado impulso de llevarlas a la sala de recepción del banco, que le recordaba la estafeta de Correos de Woollett y se le antojaba el muro botarel de algún puente transatlántico, las deslizó en el bolsillo de su ancho sobretodo gris con cierta felicidad por llevarlas encima. Waymarsh, que había recibido correspondencia el día anterior, había vuelto a tener aquel día, sin sugerir por ello en este particular ningún tipo de impulso gobernado. En cualquier caso, con el que más probabilidades tenía de forcejear era con el de llegar a una resolución prematura consistente en visitar otra vez la Rue Scribe. Strether lo había dejado allí el día anterior; quería hojear los. periódicos y había pasado, por lo que el amigo logró descubrir, una serie de horas con ellos. Hablaba de la entidad con gran aparato, como de un lugar de observación superior; tal y como hablaba, por regla general, de su detestable destino visto en tanto que mecanismo para ocultarle lo que iba a pasar. Europa se describía de manera óptima, en su sentir, como un elaborado mecanismo tendiente a disociar al norteamericano aislado de este conocimiento indispensable, sólo soportable, en consecuencia, gracias a las ocasionales estaciones de reposo, trampas para detener los errabundos aires occidentales. Strether, por su parte, se puso otra vez en movimiento, pues tenía el susodicho reposo en el bolsillo; y, a decir verdad, por mucho que hubiera deseado su ración informativa, el aumento del desasosiego habríase cebado en él desde el momento en que se hubiera asegurado del sobrescrito de la mayor parte de las misivas que el referido bolsillo contenía. Este desasosiego se convirtió, por consiguiente, en una ley temporal suya; sabía que reconocería en cuanto lo viera el más apropiado de los lugares para ponerse a tono con su principal corresponsal. Durante los sesenta minutos que transcurrieron a continuación le invadió el aura circunstancial de parecer que lo buscaba en los escaparates de las tiendas; bajó por la Rue de la Paix, inundada de sol, tras cruzar las Tullerías y el río, se permitió más de una vez —como si se hubiera decidido por fin— una repentina pausa ante los quioscos de libros de la orilla opuesta. En los jardines de las Tullerías se detuvo a mirar en un par de sitios; era como si la maravillosa primavera de París le hubiera echado el freno a medida que avanzaba. La acuciante mañana parisina irradiaba sus amables notas en una brisa apacible, en un retazo de aromas, el revoloteo ligero, en la zona ajardinada, de muchachas sin sombrero y con las abrochadas correas de cajas oblongas, en las frugales figuras de los ancianos que iban a tomar el sol muy temprano en los caldeados pretiles, en la azulenca y broncínea oficialidad de los humildes manipuladores de palas y rastrillos, en los profundos matices de un sacerdote de paso homogéneo o los contundentes de un militar de polainas blancas y pantalón rojo. Strether contemplaba aquellas pacientes figuras, figuras cuyo movimiento era como el andar del gran reloj de París, abarcando su plácida diagonal de un extremo a otro; el aire sabía a una sustancia mezclada con el arte, una sustancia que presentaba a la naturaleza como un jefe de cocina de gorro blanco. El palacio había desaparecido; Strether recordaba el palacio; y cuando escrutó el irremediable vacío de su ubicación, es posible que su sentido histórico hubiera estado jugando: ese juego con el que, en París, hace guiños frecuentes como un nervio alcanzado. Llenó los espacios con oscuros símbolos de paisaje; y entrevió el perfil de blancas estatuas en cuya basa, con las cartas en la mano, acomodaba una silla de asiento de paja. Pero su paseo se encaminaba, por ciertas razones, hacia el punto contrario, y lo condujo en volandas, sin apercibirse, hasta la Rue de Seine y hasta el Luxemburgo.

Se detuvo en los jardines del Luxemburgo; cuando menos dio allí con su rincón y allí, en una silla por la que pagó unos céntimos y desde la que los arriates, los parterres, las vistas panorámicas, las fuentes, arbolitos en cubetas verdes, mujercitas de cofia blanca y estrepitosas niñas que jugaban se «componían» de consuno bajo el sol, dejó transcurrir una hora en que el cáliz de sus impresiones pareció ciertamente desbordarse. Pero había pasado una semana desde que bajara del barco y había en su espíritu muchas más cosas de las que podía dar cuenta un escaso cúmulo de jornadas. Más de una vez, en todo este tiempo, hablase observado con ojo del que aconseja; pero la admonición fue aquella mañana formidablemente punzante. Pues pareció que aún no había tomado la forma de pregunta: una pregunta tocante a lo que estaba haciendo con aquella sensación de fuga tan extraordinaria. Esta sensación fue mucho más aguijoneante después que hubo leído las cartas, pero fue también una de las causas de que la pregunta se precipitase. Cuatro epístolas eran de la señora Newsome y ninguna de ellas breve; no había perdido el tiempo la buena mujer, se había lanzado tras los pasos del hombre mientras éste se desplazaba, poniéndose así tan de manifiesto que el hombre, a la sazón, podía calcular la frecuencia probable con que tenía que escuchar. Según parecía, le llegarían noticias de la mujer a una velocidad de varias por semana; tenía que

hacerse a la idea de que podía recibir, y esto parecía confirmado, incluso más de una en cada correo. Si hubiera comenzado el día anterior con una leve queja, habría tenido, en consecuencia, la oportunidad de comenzar el día presente con la nota contraria. Leyó las cartas una tras otra y muy despacio, dejando las restantes en el bolsillo, pero manteniendo las leídas después, durante un buen rato, en el regazo. Y allí las retuvo, sumido en meditaciones, como para prolongar la presencia de lo que le ofrecían; o, cuando menos, como para asegurarles su participación en la componenda de algún tipo de dilucidación. Su amiga escribía admirablemente y su tono se localizaba más en su estilo que en su voz: casi como si, dado el momento, el hombre hubiera llegado a aquel punto para beber sus plenas cualidades; no obstante, la enormidad de su apercepción de la diferencia concordaba totalmente con la abismada intensidad de la relación. Era la diferencia de estar precisamente donde estaba *y según* estaba lo que conformaba la fuga, una diferencia que había resultado mucho mayor de lo que imaginara; y lo que por último acabó por tantear fue la extraña lógica de saberse tan libre. En cierto modo intuía que era un deber pensar en su situación, aprobar el proceso, y cuando de hecho se puso a recorrer la andadura y sumar los capítulos, los sumandos dieron cumplida cuenta de la suma total. Nunca había esperado —esta era la verdad— sentirse joven otra vez y todos los años y demás asuntillos de que se había servido para que así fuera eran, en conjunto y con exactitud, su presente aritmética. Tenía que estar seguro de este utillaje para poner los escrúpulos en remojo.

Del fondo del hermoso deseo de la señora Newsome se deducía que no debía preocuparse por nada que no fuera el meollo de su misión; al insistir en que debía descansar y tomarse períodos de asueto, la mujer había contribuido tanto a la libertad del hombre que a ella sola habría que agradecérsela. Strether, sin embargo, no habría podido, ciertamente, completar su pensamiento en aquel instante en virtud de la imagen de la función de ese agradecimiento que ella destinaba a sí misma: la imagen del preciso retrato del hombre... el pobre Lambert Strether derrotado en la soleada ribera, agradecido por el aire que respiraba, tenso mientras boqueaba, arrojado por el oleaje de un solo día. Helo allí sin que en su aspecto y postura hubiera nada que despertara el escándalo: pero era muy cierto que si hubiera visto acercarse a la señora Newsome habría dado un bote instintivo y habríase alejado un tanto. Habría dado la vuelta para encararse con ella valientemente; pero habría tenido que contenerse. La mujer le informaba copiosamente de cuanto ocurría en Woollett, le demostraba la galanura con que se las ingeniaba en su ausencia, le contaba quién reanudaría esto y quién reanudaba aquello exactamente donde él lo había dejado, y explicábale con pelos y señales los pormenores de una moral que no estaba dispuesta a sufrir el menor daño. Le parecía al hombre que aquel tono femenino llenaba el ambiente; sin embargo, le afectó al mismo tiempo como el tufillo de las cosas vanas. Este último fenómeno fue el que trató de justificar, y con tanto éxito que, por sobria que fuera la apariencia, dio por lo menos con una forma que rezumaba felicidad. Llegó a esta forma gracias a la inevitable aceptación de haber sido una quincena antes uno de los hombres más débiles. Si alguna vez había habido un hombre totalmente cansado, Strether era ese hombre; ¿y no había sido manifiestamente sobre la base de que *estaba* cansado el que su maravillosa amiga de Woollett se hubiera preocupado tanto por él y se hubiera mostrado tan ingeniosa? En aquellos momentos le parecía que, sin saber cómo, con que pudiera mantener con suficiente firmeza el asimiento de esa verdad, ella se trocaría en cierto modo en su brújula y su timón. Lo que más deseaba era una idea simplificadora y ninguna mejor que considerar el hecho que iba a concluir. Si éste se había encontrado bajo un enfoque tal que él acabara de detectar en su cáliz las heces de su juventud, no por ello dejó de ser esto una simple desportilladura de la superficie del plan. Estaba tan palmariamente rendido que esto tenía que ser útil a su propia hacienda, y si pudiera no ser sino coherentemente honrado con la mínima suficiencia necesaria, haría cuanto deseaba.

Además, cuanto deseaba se comprendía en una única habilidad: el común e inasequible arte de tomar las cosas como llegaban. Le pareció que había entregado sus años mejores a una incesante apreciación de la forma en que no llegaban; pero tal vez —como al parecer serían ya cosas muy diferentes— tan largo quebradero de cabeza pudiera por fin encontrar un alivio. Comprendía con toda facilidad que desde el momento en que aceptara la idea de su sentenciado colapso lo último de que carecería sería de motivos y recuerdos. ¡Oh, si se decidiera a hacer la suma, ninguna pizarra sustentaría las cifras! El hecho de que hubiera fracasado, según reflexionaba, en todo, en cada una de sus relaciones, en media docena de contratos, como lujosamente le gustaba plantearlo, había podido propiciar, aún podía propiciar un presente vacío; pero se afirmaba sólidamente en un pasado concurrido. La abundancia de los objetivos incumplidos no había constituido ni un yugo ligero ni un corto camino. Era como si a la sazón la imagen retrospectiva siguiera todavía allí, el largo sendero lleno de recovecos, gris bajo la sombra de su soledad. Había sido una soledad odiosa y amable, una soledad sociable, una soledad de vida, de opciones, de comunidad; pero por más que hubiera habido gente suficiente alrededor, no había habido en el seno de la misma sino tres o cuatro personas. Era Waymarsh una de ellas y la circunstancia le impresionó en aquel momento como digna de tenerse en cuenta. Otra era la señora Newsome y la señorita Gostrey había dado muestras repentinas de

convertirse en la tercera. Más allá, allende estas personas se alzaba la pálida figura de su verdadera juventud, apretando contra el pecho a las dos presencias más vagas aún que la suya propia: la joven esposa que perdiera demasiado pronto y el hijo al que había sacrificado estúpidamente. Una y otra vez había averiguado por su cuenta que habría podido conservar al chicuelo, aquel muchachito torpe que había muerto en la escuela de una súbita difteria, si no se hubiera dedicado durante todos aquellos años, tan enfermizamente, a añorar a la madre. Lo que aguijoneó dolorosamente su remordimiento fue que, con toda probabilidad, el niño no habría sido realmente torpe y taciturno, que lo había sido como había sido desterrado y descuidado, sobre todo porque el padre se había conducido como un egoísta irresponsable. No era éste, sin duda, sino el secreto acostumbramiento a la tristeza, que poco a poco había sentido la mano blanda del tiempo; sin embargo quedaba aún un rescoldo con el fuego necesario para que el espíritu, con efecto espontáneo y repetido, de un elegante joven que acababa de madurar hiciera una mueca ante el pensamiento de la oportunidad perdida. ¿Ha existido alguna vez un hombre, había terminado por preguntarse, que haya perdido tanto y hecho también tanto para tan poco? Habíanse dado motivos particulares por los que, durante el día anterior, por no mencionar los precedentes, debiera haber sonado esta pregunta en su oído. Su nombre en la portada verde, donde lo había puesto por la señora Newsome, le ponía sin duda de manifiesto lo suficiente para que el mundo —el mundo en tanto que entidad diferenciada, para bien y para mal, de Woollett— preguntase quién era. Y había caído en el ridículo de tener que explicar aquella suerte de explicación. El era Lambert Strether porque figuraba en la cubierta, mientras que, en virtud de algo semejante a la gloria, debiera de haber figurado en la portada porque era Lambert Strether. Habría hecho cualquier cosa por la señora Newsome, habría sido incluso más ridículo —como, para el caso, tenía aún ocasión de ser—, y esto venía a decir que tamaña aceptación del destino era cuanto podía ofrecer a los cincuenta y cinco años.

Juzgaba lo cuantitativo con tanta magrura porque era magro y tanto más distinguidamente cuanto que no podía, en su sentir, haber sido concebiblemente más pingüe. Si no hubiera poseído el don de llevar a cabo la mayor parte de cuanto acometía y si hubiera intentado este acometimiento una y otra vez —y nadie que no fuera él conocía la frecuencia— habríase dicho que podía demostrar qué otras cosas, en defecto de lo precedente, podían realizarse. Recordaba antiguos fantasmas de experiencias, viejos trabajos, viejos desengaños e insatisfacciones viejas, viejas recuperaciones con las correspondientes reincidencias, viejas calenturas con los correspondientes escalofríos, interrumpidos momentos de buena fe y otros de duda empero saludable; aventuras, en su mayor parte, de la calaña calificada de aleccionadora. El resorte particular que no había dejado de moverse en su interior durante la víspera había sido la apercepción —demasiado frecuente para sorprenderle— de las promesas hechas a sí mismo que, luego de su otra visita, jamás cumpliera. La reminiscencia que revivía con mayor insistencia en la actualidad era la del juramento prestado en el curso del peregrinaje que, recién casado, con la guerra recién acabada, y desvalidamente inmaduro a pesar de esto, había hecho temerariamente con la criatura aún más joven que él. Había sido un rasgo para el que habían recurrido al dinero reservado para las necesidades, pero consagrado a ellos, por el momento, en cientos de formas, especialmente en virtud de ese privado juramento suyo de enfocar la ocasión en tanto que relación moldeada por la cultura superior, a fin de comprobar que, según se decía en Woollett, daba una excelente cosecha. Había creído, ya de vuelta al hogar, que había conquistado algo grandioso y su concepción al respecto —con un plan elaborado e inocente en lo tocante a lecturas, meditaciones y regresos incluso cada tantos años— había tenido por objeto, en aquellos días, la conservación, cuidado y extensión de lo adquirido. Como aquellos planes, sin embargo, habíanse reducido al absurdo respecto de adquisiciones aún más apetitosas, fue sin duda bien poco asombroso que acabara por perder de vista aquel puñado de semillas. Enterradas durante largos años en oscuros rincones, el caso era que aquellas escasas simientes habían vuelto a germinar al cabo de cuarenta y ocho horas en París. El discurrir del día anterior había sido en realidad el proceso de ir experimentando una conmoción general en la vida de relación, largo tiempo anulada individualmente. Strether había llegado a familiarizarse, en este sentido, incluso con prontas ráfagas de especulación, repentinos arrebatos de la fantasía en las galerías del Louvre, sedientas miradas a los diáfanos paneles tras los que los volúmenes coloreados de amarillo limón mostrábanse tan frescos como la fruta de los árboles.

Eran instantes en que podía preguntar si, dado que, fundamentalmente, no había ni que plantearse un compromiso con nada, su destino no habría sido, a fin de cuentas, el de convertirse en objeto de los cuidados ajenos. Una custodia, en tal caso, cuya finalidad no pretendía ni se atrevía siquiera a adivinar; finalidad, en definitiva, que le hizo quedarse inmóvil, maravillarse, reír y suspirar, que le provocó avances y retrocesos, mientras se sentía medio avergonzado de su anhelo de precipitarse y algo más que medio temeroso de su anhelo de esperar. Pues recordaba, por ejemplo, que había vuelto en los años sesenta obsesionado por los volúmenes coloreados de amarillo limón y también con una docena —seleccionados para su esposa— en el equipaje; y nada había manifestado más confianza en aquellos momentos que su

apelación al más refinado de los gustos. Aún se encontraban en su casa los doce volúmenes, viejos ya y estropeados, sin que nunca los enviara al encuadernador; pero ¿qué había sido de la insurgente iniciación que representaran? A la sazón representaban la vulgar pintura cetrina que cubriera la puerta del templo del gusto que había soñado construir, un edificio que, prácticamente, no había pasado de mero proyecto. Las más elevadas inspiraciones del presente de Strether eran quizás aquellas en que este lapso particular se le representaba como un símbolo de su inacabable rutina y su carencia de momentos dotados, su carencia de dinero, de oportunidades, de dignidad afirmativa. Que el recuerdo de la promesa juvenil hubiera tenido, a fin de palpitar otra vez, que esperar al último, en su sentir, de todos sus accidentes, alzábase sin duda como prueba más que suficiente de las trabas que había sufrido su conciencia. En cualquier caso, de necesitarse pruebas, éstas habrían podido localizarse en el hecho de que, según comprendía en aquel momento con toda claridad, hubiera dejado de calibrar incluso su escasez, una escasez que se extendía, en aquella retrospección, de manera vaga y general, hasta perderse al fondo como un traspaís no consignado y contemplado desde un puesto costero. Su conciencia se había estado divirtiendo, durante aquellas cuarenta y ocho horas, al prohibirle que comprara ningún libro; y él defendíase de aquello, defendíase de todo; pues, habida cuenta de que aún no había visitado a Chad, por nada en el mundo daría ningún otro paso. Con esta prueba, sin embargo, de la forma en que le afectaban realmente, repasaba con la mirada las portadas coloreadas de amarillo limón con el fantaseo subconsciente de que, en cualquier caso, en el gran desierto de los años, debía de haber poseído algunas. Las portadas verdes de Woollett no comprendían, en virtud de su finalidad, ningún homenaje a las letras; a base de un selecto surtido de economía, política y ética, debidamente embalado y, como sostenía la señora Newsome bastante en contra del punto de vista del hombre, preeminentemente agradable al tacto, daban forma a la especiosa cáscara. En consecuencia, sin ninguna necesidad de conocimiento instintivo de lo que iba a ocurrir, allí, en la luminosa avenida parisina le parecía en aquel momento que más de una vez había experimentado los asaltos de la sospecha; de lo contrario era imposible que sintiera tantos temores confirmados en la actualidad. Había «movimientos» para los que era demasiado tarde —¿acaso no se habían consumido ya con el gozo de los mismos?—. Había series que había olvidado y considerables vacíos en las secuencias; habría podido muy bien contemplar toda aquella retrospección en una dorada nube de polvo. Si el teatro no estaba cerrado su asiento por lo menos habría correspondido a algún otro. La noche pasada había experimentado la inquietante sensación de que, ya que se encontraba en el teatro —aunque, ciertamente, justificaba el teatro, en su sentido concreto, y con una extravagancia a la que su imaginación rendía todos los honores, como algo que adeudara al pobre Waymarsh—, habría tenido que ser con Chad y, cosa bien probable, para Chad asimismo.

Así pues, con las cartas en el regazo —cartas sujetas con intensidad nerviosa e inconsciente—, pensaba, en aquel rinconcito del Luxemburgo, con orden extraño y acaparador, en cosas que se alejaban por momentos en el espacio, en el pasado y en el futuro, para volver precipitadamente, con cierta sensación de haber perdido el aliento, pero con chasquido suave y tranquilizador, al día precedente y al actual. Fue así como volvió al rompecabezas relativo a la noche, a la cuestión de si habría podido llevar a Chad a ver la obra y qué efecto —fue ésta una consideración repentina— habría podido causar su responsabilidad para con Chad en la elección del entretenimiento. Prácticamente no dejó de pensar en el Gimnasio —donde además se estaba comparativamente a salvo— que tener a su lado al joven amigo habría constituido un extraño rasgo de la obra redentora; y ello muy a despecho de que la imagen, comparada con el panorama privado de Chad, podría haber semejado perfectamente el modelo de lo apropiado. Pero, a todas luces, no había emprendido el viaje en nombre de lo apropiado sólo para asistir a desaliñadas actuaciones equívocas; y, no obstante, menos aún lo había emprendido para socavar su autoridad compartiéndola con la grosera juventud. ¿Iba a renunciar a todo esparcimiento en nombre de los plácemes de dicha autoridad? ¿Daríale tamaña renuncia delante de Chad un encanto moral? Este pequeño problema erizábase al máximo en razón del franco sentido de la ironía que poseía el pobre Strether. ¿Es que había facetas, en tal caso, en que su ascendiente corría el peligro de volverse divertido? ¿Habría tenido que fingir que creía —en cuanto a sí mismo o en cuanto al jovencito descarriado— que había algo que podía empeorar esto último? ¿No implicaba tamaña pretensión la hipótesis de que había cosas que podían mejorarlo? Su incontenible desasosiego parecía insinuarle la probable sensación de que la asunción de París, por mínima que fuera, llevaríase consigo la autoridad de cualquiera. Pues aquella vasta y resplandeciente Babilonia manteníase ante él aquella mañana como un objeto inmenso e iridiscente, una gema dura y brillante donde las partes no se discriminarían ni las diferencias se señalarían cómodamente. Parpadeba, tremolaba y se derretía; y lo que un segundo antes pareciera superficie, a la sazón parecía todo profundidad. Era un lugar al que, sin posibilidad de confusiones, Chad hablase aficionado; por lo tanto, si a él, Strether, le encantaba sobremanera, ¿quién sabía lo que sería de ellos? Todo dependía, naturalmente —lo que era un rayo de esperanza—, de la medida concreta con que se interpretase el «sobremanera»; aunque, a decir verdad, nuestro amigo sabía con toda sinceridad que, por lo que a él respectaba, y esto mientras prolongaba las

meditaciones que describo, incluso en aquel preciso momento había colmado cierta medida. Se habrá comprendido con suficiencia que no era hombre que desdeñase ninguna buena ocasión para reflexionar. ¿Era posible, de algún modo, por ejemplo, aficionarse a París con suficiencia sin aficionarse demasiado? El, por fortuna, no había prometido a la señora Newsome que no le gustara en modo alguno. Estaba pronto a advertir en esta fase que un compromiso de este tenor le habría atado las manos. Los jardines del Luxemburgo eran tan incuestionablemente adorables en aquel momento porque —aparte el encanto intrínseco del lugar— no se había prestado a ello. El único compromiso que había aceptado era, cuando encaraba la cuestión, el de hacer lo que buenamente pudiera.

Sin embargo, le produjo cierta alteración, al cabo de un rato, sorprenderse en el recuerdo del flujo de asociaciones en que había flotado hasta tan lejos. Las antiguas imágenes del Barrio Latino habían tenido su peso y había recordado puntualmente que Chad había comenzado sus correrías en relación con aquel escenario de leyenda más bien ominosa, al igual que tantos otros jóvenes de la ficción y de la realidad. Ahora tenía su «casa», como Strether se representaba el lugar, bastante lejos de allí, en el Boulevard Malesherbes; y ésta era quizá la razón por la que, al pensar, para hacerle justicia, con profundidad en el antiguo barrio, nuestro amigo había intuido que podía hacerse cargo de lo usual y lo inmemorial sin necesidad de buscarse contratiempos. No corría, dicho de otro modo, peligro alguno de que se viera al joven y a Cierta Persona pavoneándose en compañía mutua; y sin embargo seguía sin resolver precisamente aquello —sólo para saber cuál tenía que haber sido la primera nota, la natural— a propósito de lo cual necesitaba consejo al máximo. De pronto comprendió con toda claridad que al principio y durante unos cuantos días había fantaseado casi envidiosamente con los privilegios románticos del muchacho. Melancolía Murger, junto con Francine, Musette y Rodolphe, era, en compañía de las desgarradas del otro lado del charco, una de la docena errabunda, si es que él mismo no albergaba dos o tres en su interior; y cuando Chad había escrito, cinco o seis años atrás, después de una temporada que ya se prolongaba en varios meses, que había decidido preocuparse por la economía y las cosas de verdad, la fantasía de Strether habíale acompañado con mucho gusto en aquella migración que había de conducirle, como más bien confusamente supieron en Woollett, al otro lado de los puentes y hasta la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève. Era ésta la zona —Chad no se había llamado a engaño a este respecto— en que el mejor francés y muchas otras cosas podían aprenderse por poco precio y en que un enjambre de astutos individuos, compatriotas allí con premeditación, formaban un plantel siniestramente acogedor. Los astutos individuos, los amistosos paisanos eran en su mayor parte pintores, escultores, arquitectos, estudiantes de música y de medicina; pero constituían, según opinaba Chad con toda sabiduría, un conjunto mucho más provechoso con el que estar —aun sobre la base de no ser en modo alguno uno de ellos— que el de los «insoportables gorilas» (Strether recordaba aquella edificante puntualización) de los bares y bancos americanos que se alzaban en los alrededores de la Opera. Chad había anunciado, en las misivas que siguieron a la mencionada —pues en aquella época las mandaba de tarde en tarde—, que lo habían aceptado en un grupo de inquietos trabajadores a las órdenes de uno de los grandes artistas, que le daba de cenar en sus reales casi por una miseria y que incluso le forzaba a que no olvidase el presupuesto de que había tanto «en él» como en cualquiera de los demás. Había habido un momento en que habría dicho que de verdad podía haber algo en él; como fuera, el caso es que había habido un momento en que había escrito que lo único que sabía era que al cabo de un par de meses tal vez estuviera contratado en un *atelier*. Fue el momento en que la señora Newsome se sintió movida a agradecer aquella bendición; habíaseles ocurrido a todos, como milagro llovido del cielo, que a lo mejor el ausente sabía lo que hacía, que, en pocas palabras, se había saciado de tanta holgazanería y deseo de variedad. Las pruebas no fueron, ni que decir tiene, tan brillantes, pero el mismo Strether, aunque muy atareado y absorto por entonces, había dado lugar, por lo que tocaba a las dos damas, a una templada aprobación y, de hecho, según iba recordando, a cierto austero entusiasmo.

Lo que había ocurrido a continuación, sin embargo, hubo de quedar sumido en la oscuridad. El hijo y hermano no había abrevado mucho tiempo en la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève: 1 de hecho, el reducido uso de este nombre, al igual que las alusiones al mejor francés, no pareció sino uno de tantos detalles de su ingenio grosero. El ligero descanso de tan vanas apariencias, por consiguiente, no habían llevado demasiado lejos ni una cosa ni otra. Por otro lado, esto le había dado una oportunidad, sin restricciones, de desarraigarse; le había preparado el camino para iniciativas más directas y más profundas. Strether creía que, en comparación, había sido más bien inocente antes de su primera migración, e incluso que los primeros efectos del viaje no habrían tenido que ser deplorados de no darse ninguna desventurada circunstancia. Durante tres meses —proyectados con perseverancia— Chad había procurado serlo. Lo había intentado, aunque no con el ahínco necesario; había tenido su breve hora de buena fe. La flaqueza de este principio consistía en que casi cualquier accidente de índole perversa podía ser de fuerza superior. Su carácter impetuoso, tempranamente admitido, y no obstante tan difícil de predecir, había hecho acto de presencia irreversiblemente para convertirse en afección crónica. Como fuera, aquí radicaba palmariamente

la causa del desencadenamiento de una serie particular de impresiones. Una vez tras otra habíanse manifestado dichas impresiones —todas las de Musette y de Francine, aunque una Musette y una Francine vulgarizadas a consecuencia de la prolongada evolución del tipo— arrolladoramente intensas; el desdichado joven había «alternado», según lo poco que en aquel momento pudo conjeturarse y cuya mención apenas si podía permitirse, con una personita vorazmente «interesada» tras otra. Strether había leído en alguna página de Théophile Gautier un lema latino, una descripción de las horas cuando el viajero, que se encuentra en España, observa un reloj[1]; y se había sentido inducido a aplicarlo mentalmente a la una de Chad, las dos de Chad, las tres de Chad, por más que los números, a este respecto, podían plantear la cuestión, ciertamente, de si los que figuraban en la modesta esfera del reloj no serían sobrepasados. *Omnes vulnerant, ultima necat:* todas habían herido mortalmente, la última había moralmente matado. La última había sido la más duradera en lo tocante a posesión: posesión, claro está, de lo que quedaba de la refinada moralidad del infeliz muchacho. Y de no haber sido ella habría sido cualquiera de sus predecesoras la determinadora de la segunda migración, de la desandadura del camino, o sea, en el sentido de camino de la desmoralización, costoso regreso y recaída, nuevo intercambio, como era de esperar, del ostentoso mejor francés por algo que, en cierto modo, podía ser parte de ese ambiguo ideal, aunque no, ciertamente, la parte que permitía publicidad, de la apreciación o del análisis de las variedades de la cualidad. Lo único que la señora Newsome había sabido de su hijo en los últimos dilatados tiempos era que había reanudado sus trabajos en el barrio caro —así era como ella lo llamaba para su capote— y que aún no se había forjado una reputación sin visos de intimidad. Había viajado en la dirección soñada casi como un rajá, con la excepción de que sus palanquines habían carecido de cortinas y sus ocupantes de velo; en pocas palabras, había tenido compañía —escandalosa, indiscreta compañía— en lugares públicos, una compañía que compartía con él, durante el cínico viaje, de escala en escala y de día en día, avances cada vez más osados y se tomaba libertades cada vez mayores: rastros, ecos, leyendas casi, en conjunto, que la pareja dejaba a su paso.

Por fin decidióse Strether, en aquel momento, a emprender el camino de vuelta; y no con la sensación de haber hecho su paseo en vano. Lo prolongó un poco por los alrededores, tras haberse levantado de la silla; el resultado obtenido de aquella mañana era, en su sentir, que había comenzado la campaña. Había querido entablar relaciones y sufriría peligrosas consecuencias si no lo hacía. Y en ningún momento lo hizo más que cuando, bajo las antiguas arcadas del Odeón, se entretuvo ante el encantador muestrario al aire libre de literatura clásica y de circunstancias. Estimó que el efecto de tonos y matices era delicado y apetitoso en aquellas mesas y estantes sobrecargados; la impresión —si se sustituía un tipo de *consommation* barata por otro— habría podido ser acaso la producida por uno de los agradables cafés que, bajo un toldo, se extendían hasta la calle; el caso es que fue paseándose lentamente, rozando las mesas, con las manos cogidas detrás. No estaba allí para hojear libros, para consumir: estaba allí para reconstruir. No estaba allí en provecho propio, es decir, no en provecho directo; se encontraba allí para tener la oportunidad de sentir el roce del ala del perdido espíritu de la juventud. De hecho lo sentía, lo tenía a su costado; ciertamente, la antigua arcada, según percibía su sexto sentido, emitía el leve murmullo, como procedente de la lejanía, de un alocado batir de alas. Abrazaban a la sazón los bustos de generaciones enterradas; no obstante, permanecía vivo un par de revoloteos en la página vuelta de los holgazanes de pelo largo y sombrero caído cuya jovial intensidad de aspecto, en el sentido de clara agudeza, profundizaba su visión, incluso su apreciación de las diferencias raciales, y cuya manipulación de intensos volúmenes no era, con demasiada frecuencia, más que un escuchar detrás de puertas cerradas. Imaginaba a un posible Chad desorientado cuatro o cinco años antes, un Chad que, a fin de cuentas, había sido sencillamente —pues no podía juzgarse de otra manera— demasiado vulgar para sus propios privilegios. No había duda de que gozar de la juventud y la felicidad en aquellos parajes era un privilegio. Bueno, el caso era que lo mejor que Strether sabía de él era que había tenido tales sueños.

Media hora más tarde, sin embargo, su atención se centraba en un tercer piso del Boulevard Malesherbes, siempre que esto fuera algo concreto; y el hecho de que contemplara gozosamente las ventanas de un mirador del tercer piso, detalle que le fue de gran ayuda, quizá tuviera algo que ver con su demora de cinco minutos en la acera de enfrente. Puntos había respecto de los que tenía que recomponer las ideas y uno de ellos tenía que ver, precisamente, con la prudencia de la brusquedad con que los sucesos habían acabado por comprometerle, una política que le complacía descubrir no afectada en modo alguno mientras consultaba el reloj y se sorprendía. Se había anunciado hacía seis meses; había escrito, por lo menos, que no se sorprendiera si le veía aparecer algún día. Chad, en consecuencia, con breves palabras que componían una respuesta más bien intencionadamente anodina, le dio una vaga bienvenida; y Strether, reflexionando pesarosamente que el otro habría podido entender el aviso como una alusión a la hospitalidad, una insinuación de la oferta invitadora, había replicado con un silencio a modo de censura de su propio tacto. Además, había pedido a la señora Newsome que no volviera a anunciar su llegada; tenía una noción tan particular de su empresa que, de abocarse a ella, había de hacerlo a su modo. No fue el

menor de los elevados méritos de la dama que el hombre pudiera confiar totalmente en la palabra de la mujer. Era la única mujer que conocía, incluso en Woollett, de la que estaba totalmente convencido de que la mentira estaba más allá de sus artes. Sarah Pocock, por ejemplo, la propia hija de la anterior, aunque con ideales sociales, como se decía, diferentes en algunos aspectos, Sarah, que era, a su modo, una esteta, nunca había desdeñado en el trasiego humano tamaña mitigación del rigor; ocasiones había habido en que el hombre la había visto aplicarla sin posibilidad de error. En cualquier caso, como había obtenido de la señora Newsome que, fuera cual fuese el precio que costase a sus enérgicos puntos de vista, la mujer se conformara, en lo tocante a la preparación de Chad, enteramente a las restricciones del hombre, éste alzó la mirada hasta el bien delineado mirador con la seguridad de que si el caso naufragaba, él por lo menos sería el único responsable. ¿Surgió tal vez alguna sospecha de lo referido en su pausa al filo del Boulevard y bien a la vista?

Muchas fueron las cosas que se le ocurrieron en aquel lugar y una de ellas era que tenía que saber en aquel instante y sin que hubiera lugar a dudas si había sido superficial o descomedido. Otra fue que el mirador de marras no manifestaba de ninguna de las maneras ser un útil arquitectónico de fácil rendición. El pobre Strether tuvo que admitir en aquel momento una gran verdad: que, siempre que uno paraba en París, la imaginación reaccionaba antes de que se le pudiera echar el freno. Esta reacción continua ponía precio, de desearlo, a las pausas; pero acumulaba las consecuencias hasta el punto de no quedar espacio para seleccionar los propios pasos de entre las mismas. ¿Cómo llamaría, en tal coyuntura, por ejemplo, de modo que la llamada se ajustase ni más ni menos que a la casa de Chad? Elevada, amplia, despejada —tenía suficiente experiencia para saber en un momento que estaba admirablemente construida—, no hay duda de que atribulaba a nuestro amigo en virtud de un prurito que, según habría dicho él mismo, le «asaltó». Había rechazado la fantasía de que, a modo de preliminares, pudiera serle útil que le vieran, gracias a una feliz coincidencia, desde las ventanas de aquel tercer piso, que recibía de pleno el sol de marzo; pero ¿qué utilidad iba a reportarle si al cabo de un rato descubrió que el prurito «asaltante», la cualidad producida por la mesura y el equilibrio, la delicada relación de una parte con otra, de un espacio con otro, era probablemente —sumada la presencia de unos ornatos tan positivos como discretos y la naturaleza de la piedra—, ni más ni menos que un caso de distinción, un caso tal que él no podía por menos de sentir sino, inesperadamente, como una especie de provocación que se le lanzaba? Mientras tanto, sin embargo, la oportunidad con que había contado —la oportunidad de que lo vieran a tiempo desde el mirador— se había convertido en realidad. Dos o tres ventanas se habían abierto al aire violeta; y antes de que Strether hubiera cortado el nudo gordiano cruzando la calle, un joven había aparecido, le había mirado, había encendido un cigarrillo y arrojado la cerilla, y luego, tras apoyarse en el antepecho, habíase puesto, mientras fumaba, a contemplar la vida que corría a sus pies. Su llegada contribuyó, desde el primer momento, a que Strether mantuviera sus posiciones; resultado de lo cual fue, a su vez, que Strether no tardara en advertir que se percataban de su presencia. El joven se puso a mirarle como si se diera cuenta de que le observaban.

Fue cosa interesante de ver mientras duró, pero el interés estaba influido por el hecho de no ser Chad aquel joven. Strether se preguntó al principio si se trataba tal vez de un Chad cambiado; vio entonces que aquello era pedir demasiado cambio. El joven era rubio, despierto y alegre, con un aire demasiado complacido para haberlo tenido a fuerza de concesiones. Strether había pensado en Chad como en un sujeto cicatrizado, pero no tanto que escapara a la identificación. Pero intuyó que tenía que vérselas con no pocas rectificaciones, a decir verdad; enmienda suficiente era que el joven de allí arriba tuviera que ser amigo de Chad. Era joven también, el joven de allí arriba: era muy joven; lo bastante joven, al parecer, para divertirse ante un observador de más edad, para sentir curiosidad incluso por ver lo que el observador de más edad haría al darse cuenta de que era observado. Había juventud en aquello, había juventud en la entrega al mirador, había juventud, para Strether y en aquel momento, en todo salvo en sus propios menesteres; la relación de aquel modo proclamada entre Chad y la juventud había dado, segundos después, un extraordinario y rápido empuje al asunto. El mirador, la distinguida fachada dio muestras repentinas, en la imaginación de Strether, de que algo subía sin cesar; ambos fijaban el conjunto del caso en su materialidad precisa y, como en una imagen admirable, a tal nivel que se sorprendió al filo de otro momento regocijándose de pensar en lo que acaso alcanzara. El joven seguía mirándole; él miraba al joven; el caso fue que, en virtud de un rápido proceso, aquel conocimiento de intimidad inestable parecióle el supremo lujo. También habíase abierto para él la intimidad inestable y a la sazón no la veía sino bajo una sola luz: la del único domicilio, el único hogar de la gran ciudad irónica sobre el que podía verter un atisbo de imperativo. La señorita Gostrey tenía una casa; ella le había hablado al respecto y se trataba de algo que sin duda le aguardaba; pero la señorita Gostrey no había llegado aún, ni llegaría durante unos días; de modo que el único atenuante de su condición excluida era la configuración imaginaria del pequeño hotel, de admitida categoría secundaria, en una bocacalle de la Rue de la Paix, en que le había situado la solicitación femenina del premio masculino, que le afectaba sin saber cómo igual que todo frío de puertas adentro, los

patios con techumbre de cristal y las escaleras resbaladizas y que, en razón de lo mismo, Waymarsh difundía incluso en ocasiones en que Waymarsh habría podido estar seguro de encontrarse en el banco. Ocurriósele de pasada antes de emprender un solo movimiento que Waymarsh y sólo Waymarsh, un Waymarsh sin diluir y además eficazmente fortalecido, se le manifestaba como la actual alternativa al joven del balcón. Cuando echó a andar fue para huir abiertamente de aquella alternativa. Cruzar la calle por fin y pasar por la *porte-cochère* de la casa fue como anular a Waymarsh conscientemente. Sin embargo, se lo contaría todo al respecto.

Libro tercero

I

Strether se lo contó todo al respecto aquella misma noche mientras cenaban juntos en el hotel; cosa que no habría tenido necesidad de suceder, según supo durante toda la velada, si no hubiera optado por sacrificar a tamaña ocasión una oportunidad más extraña. La mención que hizo a Waymarsh de este sacrificio fue, además, precisamente lo que propició su relato, o, como habría dicho de tener más confianza en su interlocutor, su confesión. Su confesión era que había sido capturado y que uno de los rasgos del asunto había consistido justamente en declinar una invitación a cenar en el lugar de los hechos. Como en virtud de semejante libertad Waymarsh se habría quedado solo, había obedecido a su propio escrúpulo; al igual que había obedecido a otro escrúpulo aún, en relación con su propia aportación de un huésped.

Waymarsh parecía severamente entusiasmado, delante de la sopa terminada, ante aquel despliegue de escrúpulos; Strether aún no se había acostumbrado del todo a mantenerse tan inerme ante las consecuencias de la impresión que causaba. Era bastante fácil de explicar, sin embargo, que no hubiera estado seguro de que su huésped fuera bien acogido. El individuo en cuestión era un joven con el que había trabado conocimiento aquella misma tarde en el curso de una pesquisa más bien interrumpida a propósito de otra persona: pesquisa, de hecho, que el nuevo amigo había evitado fuera vana.

—Oh —exclamó Strether—, tengo infinidad de cosas que contarte —diciéndolo de un modo que, prácticamente, fue una insinuación a Waymarsh para que le ayudase a hacer amena la historia. Esperó su pescado, sorbió un poco de vino, se enjugó el largo mostacho, se repantigó en la silla y siguió con los ojos a las dos damas inglesas que acababan de pasar entre murmullos y a quienes habría incluso saludado manifiestamente de no haber congelado el impulso ellas mismas; de modo que lo único que pudo hacer fue, por hacer algo, decir—: *Merci, François!* -en voz bastante alta cuando le sirvieron el pescado. Tenía allí todo lo que quería, todo lo que podía convertir el momento en una ocasión excepcional: todo menos lo que Waymarsh podía dar. La pequeña y encerada *salle-àmanger* era amarilla y se prestaba a la sociabilidad; François, que danzaba por ella deshecho en sonrisas, era todo un caballero; la *patronne* de hombros subidos, con sus alzadas y callosas manos, parecía asentir siempre, y de modo exagerado, a cuanto no se decía; la nocha parisina, en pocas palabras, estaba para Strether en el mismo sabor de la sopa, en la excelencia, como inocentemente le gustaba pensar, del vino, en la satisfactoria aspereza del mantel y en el crujir del pan de gruesa corteza. Eran cosas, todas ellas, que casaban con su confesión y la confesión consistía en que había —habría sugerido con propiedad sólo con que Waymarsh lo hubiera aceptado apropiadamente— convenido en desayunar fuera, a las doce en punto, al día siguiente. No sabía muy bien dónde; la delicadeza de la situación brotó derechamente del recuerdo del «Ya veremos, lo llevaré a alguna parte» de su nuevo amigo, pues había precisado poco más que esto, a fin de cuentas, aceptarlo sin ambages. Se sintió presa, pasado un instante, frente por frente con su amigo, del impulso de exagerar las tintas. Ya había habido cosas respecto de las cuales se había sentido tentado por esta perversidad. Si Waymarsh las estimaba perjudiciales, tendría por lo menos sus motivos para estar molesto; de modo que Strether las presentaba como si fueran peores. No obstante, a la sazón encontrábase a su manera sinceramente perplejo.

Chad había estado ausente del Boulevard Malesherbes, lo estaba de París en realidad; lo había sabido por el portero, pero a pesar de todo había subido, y subido —pues no había dos maneras de hacerlo— con una curiosidad realmente incontrolable y, si se quería, depravada. El portero le había dicho que, mientras tanto, el *trosième lo* ocupaba un amigo del inquilino; y éste había sido el pretexto de Strether para emprender una pesquisa de mayores alcances, una experiencia llevada a cabo bajo el techo de Chad y sin su conocimiento.

—En efecto, allí encontré a su amigo, calentando el lugar por él, como él mismo dijo; Chad está, al parecer, en el sur. Se fue a Cannes hace un mes y aunque se desea ya su regreso, aún transcurrirán unos

días. Como verás, yo habría podido esperar i muy bien una semana; habría podido batirme en retirada tan pronto como obtuve esta información básica. Pero no me batí en retirada; hice todo lo contrario; me quedé, maté el tiempo, tonteé; ante todo observé cuanto me rodeaba. Vi, en conclusión; y, no sé cómo decirlo, olisqueé. Es un detalle, pero es como si allí hubiera algo, algo muy bueno, que olisquear.

El rostro de Waymarsh había manifestado a su amigo una atención al parecer tan escasa que este último quedó un tanto sorprendido de ver que en este punto estaban a la par.

—¿Quieres decir un olor? ¿A qué?

—Un aroma encantador. Pero no sé a qué.

Waymarsh emitió un gruñido de deducción.

—¿Vive allí con una mujer?

Pero Strether había respondido ya:

—No lo sé.

Waymarsh esperó unos instantes un poco más de información, y al cabo concluyó:

—¿Se la ha llevado consigo?

—¿Y se la traerá? —no pudo por menos de preguntar Strether. Pero terminó por decir lo mismo que antes—: No lo sé.

La forma de terminar la cuestión, seguida por otra pausa, otra gustación del Léoville, otra enjugación de bigotes y otra satisfecha interjección a François, pareció originar en el compañero una leve irritación.

—Entonces ¿qué demonios sabes?

—Bueno —dijo Strether, casi contento—, presumo que no sé nada. —Es posible que su alegría fuese un tributo rendido al hecho de que la situación a que se había visto reducido volvía a producirle lo que le había producido su conversación con la señorita Gostrey en el teatro londinense. Era, sin saber cómo, dilatador; y el aire de esta amplitud se contuvo sin duda, de un modo u otro (y todo para que Waymarsh lo advirtiera) en la continuación de su respuesta—: Esto es lo que averigüé gracias al joven.

—Pero me pareció que decías que no habías averiguado nada.

—Nada salvo esto: que no sé nada.

—¿Y en qué sentido te beneficia lo que dices?

—He venido precisamente —dijo Strether— para que me ayudes a descubrirlo. Me refiero a todo, sobre todo lo que hay aquí. Es algo que *siento,* incluso allí. Por lo general se alza ante mí con toda su fuerza. Además, el joven, el amigo de Chad, también me lo dijo.

—¿También te dijo que no sabes nada acerca de nada? —Waymarsh pareció buscar con la mirada a alguien que también se lo hubiera dicho—. ¿Qué edad tiene?

—Bueno, creo que no rebasa la treintena.

—¿Y a pesar de todo aceptaste tantas cosas suyas?

—Oh, acepté muchas más... porque, sí, como te lo digo, acepté una invitación para *déjeuner* juntos.

—¿Y piensas *ir* a esa comida atroz?

—Si vienes conmigo, sí. Ya sabes, él quiere que tú también acudas. Le estuve hablando de ti. Y me dio su tarjeta —prosiguió Strether—, tiene un nombre muy gracioso. Se llama John Little Bilham y dice que como tiene los dos apellidos tan breves siempre los utiliza juntos.

—Bien —preguntó Waymarsh con procedente hincapié a raíz de aquellos detalles—, ¿qué hace allí?

—Él dice de sí mismo que es «únicamente un pequeño artista». Lo que me parece perfecto para describirlo. Pero se encuentra todavía en fase de preparación; ya sabes en qué consiste el gran aprendizaje del arte: dejar transcurrir determinada cantidad de años en cuyo curso uno se supera. Además es un gran amigo de Chad y está instalado en su casa porque se llevan bien. Es un hombre muy agradable y también curioso —añadió Strether-... aunque no es de Boston.

Waymarsh parecía ya harto de él.

—¿Y de dónde es?

Strether se quedó meditando.

—Tampoco lo sé. Pero es «notorio», según él mismo dice, que no es de Boston.

—Bueno —sentenció Waymarsh con singular profundidad—, es notorio que no todo el mundo ha de ser de Boston. ¿Y por qué —añadió— es curioso?

—Tal vez por *eso* sólo... ¡por una cosa nada más! Aunque en realidad —prosiguió Strether— por todo. Cuando lo conozcas te darás cuenta.

—Oh, pero si yo no quiero conocerlo —gruñó Waymarsh con impaciencia—. ¿Por qué no vuelve a su tierra?

Strether vaciló.

—Bueno, porque le gusta estar aquí.

Aquello concretamente pareció sobrepasar el límite de lo que Waymarsh podía soportar.

—Entonces debiera avergonzarse de sí mismo, y ya que admites que tú opinas igual, no sé por qué le haces el juego.

La respuesta de Strether volvió a tomarse su tiempo.

—Es posible que yo piense así... aunque no esté dispuesto a admitirlo. No estoy muy seguro: es otra de las cosas que quiero saber. El hombre me es simpático, y tú podrías simpatizar con los demás... Pero no importa. —Strether había contenido su ímpetu—. No hay duda de que lo que quiero es que te me eches encima y me endereces una reprimenda.

Waymarsh se sirvió del siguiente plato que, no obstante no coincidir con el que acababan de servir a las damas inglesas, tuvo la virtud de provocar un efecto momentáneamente errabundo en su imaginación. Al cabo hubo de llevarle a un tema más apacible.

—¿Es lugar agradable el de estos dos hombres?

—Oh, un lugar encantador; lleno de bellos y valiosos objetos. Jamás vi un sitio igual —y el pensamiento de Strether fluyó hasta el espacio evocado—. ¡Para un pequeño artista...! —Verdaderamente, apenas si podía decirlo con palabras.

Pero su compañero, que a la sazón parecía haber captado algún concepto, insistió:

—¿Sí?

—Bueno, la vida no puede proporcionar nada mejor. Además, está a cargo de ciertas cosas.

—O sea que hace de portero de tu maravillosa pareja. ¿Puede la vida —preguntó Waymarsh— proporcionar nada mejor que *esto?* —Y como Strether, silencioso, pareciera asombrado pese a todo, añadió —: ¿Acaso no sabe cómo es ella?

—No lo sé. No se lo he preguntado. No habría podido hacerlo. Habría sido imposible. Y tú tampoco habrías podido. Además, no quise. No más que tú. —Strether se explicó en pocas palabras—. No se puede averiguar aquí lo que las personas saben.

—Entonces ¿para qué fuiste?

—Bueno, supongo que para ver las cosas por mí mismo... sin ayuda ajena.

—¿Para qué quieres la mía, entonces?

—Oh —Strether se echó a reír—, ¡tú no eres uno de ellos! Yo sé lo que *tú* sabes.

Como, a pesar de todo, la última afirmación moviera a Waymarsh a dirigirle una mirada severa —pues tales eran las dudas de éste respecto de las implicaciones de dicha afirmación—, le pareció que su justificación se había quedado corta.

Sensación que se acentuó cuando Waymarsh dijo:

—Préstame atención, Strether. Esto se ha terminado.

Nuestro amigo sonrió con vacilación.

—¿Te refieres a mi tono?

—No... y maldito sea tu tono. Me refiero a ese curiosear tuyo. Se ha terminado todo el asunto. Deja que se cuezan en su propia salsa. Te están utilizando para un trabajo para el que no sirves. Nadie almohaza un caballo con un peine de púas delicadas.

—¿Soy un peine de púas delicadas? —Strether se echó a reír—. Jamás se me habría ocurrido calificarme con esa expresión.

—De cualquier modo, no eres otra cosa. Ya no eres tan joven, pero aún conservas la dentadura[2].

Apreció el humor de su amigo.

—¡Pues cuida que no te los clave! Waymarsh, creo que mis amigos te gustarían —manifestó—; creo que de veras te gustarían. Y sé —era ligeramente irrelevante, pero hizo repentino y particular hincapié en ello —, sé que simpatizarían contigo.

—¡Por favor, no me los eches encima! —gruñó Waymarsh.

Sin embargo, Strether seguía sin enseñar sus cartas.

—A decir verdad, es poco menos que necesario decir que Chad debiera volver.

—¿Necesario para quién? ¿Para ti?

—Sí —dijo Strether.

—¿Porque si te haces con él te haces también con la señora Newsome?

Strether enfocó de cara la cuestión.

—Sí.

—¿Y si él se te escapa se te escapa ella?

Es posible que aquello fuera demasiado crudo, pero no se arredró.

—Pienso que podría afectar de algún modo a nuestra relación personal. Chad es realmente importante, o puede serlo con facilidad si se lo propone, para el negocio.

—¿Y el negocio tiene importancia para el marido de su madre?

—Bueno, yo, como es natural, quiero lo que mi futura es posa quiera. Y las cosas irán mucho mejor si

tenemos con nosotros a un hombre de confianza.

—En otras palabras —dijo Waymarsh—, si tenéis en el negocio a un hombre de confianza, te casarás, tú personalmente, con una mujer de fortuna. Ella ya es rica, según has dicho tú mismo, pero será más rica todavía si el negocio marcha por cauces que ya te has encargado de abrir.

—Yo no he abierto nada —replicó Strether al instante—. El señor Newsome, que sabía extraordinariamente bien lo que hacía, los abrió hace diez años.

¡Vamos! Waymarsh pareció indicar con un movimiento de cabellera que aquello no tenía importancia.

—De cualquier modo, tú eres el motor del nuevo florecimiento.

Su amigo sopesó durante unos instantes silenciosos la verdad de lo que se le imputaba.

—Creo que apenas soy mercader de ese calificativo, sobre todo porque he aceptado libremente la posibilidad, el riesgo de ser influido en sentido contrario a los sentimientos de la señora Newsome.

Waymarsh concedió a aquella afirmación una atención prolongada.

—Entiendo. Tienes miedo de ser sobornado. De cualquier modo —añadió—, eres un cínico.

—¡Oh! —se quejó Strether sin perder un segundo.

—Sí, me pides protección... cosa que te convierte en persona interesante; pero luego no la aceptas. Y dices que quieres ser reprendido...

—Ah, pero no de manera tan sencilla. ¿Acaso no te percatas —preguntó Strether— de dónde se encuentra mi interés, según te he manifestado ya? Precisamente en no ser víctima de arreglos. Si lo soy, ¿qué ocurriría con mi matrimonio? Si no cumplo mi misión, me quedo sin matrimonio, y si pierdo esto lo pierdo todo... no estaré en ninguna parte.

Waymarsh —aunque totalmente inexorable— meditó aquellas cosas.

—¿Qué se me da a mí dónde estés si estarás arruinado?

Se miraron fijamente durante unos momentos.

—Muchísimas gracias —dijo por fin Strether—. ¿No piensas que el punto de vista de *ella* en este sentido...?

—¿Debiera bastarme? No.

Aquello hizo que volvieran a mirarse a los ojos, hecho lo cual Strether se echó a reír otra vez.

—La tratas injustamente. Realmente *tendrías* que conocerla. Buenas noches.

Desayunó por la mañana con el señor Bilham y, como insustancialmente era de esperar, con Waymarsh alegrando la reunión. Este dijo, a eso de las once y para gran sorpresa de su amigo, que, maldita sea, estaba dispuesto a unirse a él para hacer lo que fuera; con lo que fueron paseando, con una sensación de imparcialidad prácticamente de lujo, hasta el Boulevard Malesherbes, pareja seducida aquel día por el vivo encanto de París tan manifiestamente, y no había más que verlo, como cualquier otro par de amigos de los miles que diariamente se sentían seducidos. Pasearon, vagaron, se pasmaron y hasta medio se perdieron; Strether no había disfrutado durante años de tan nutrida conciencia del tiempo: un saquito de oro en que continuamente metía la mano para coger un puñado. Tenía muy claro que cuando terminara el asuntillo del señor Bilham aún le quedarían unas cuantas horas maravillosas para disponer de ellas a su antojo. No palpitaba la premura con exceso, sin embargo, en lo tocante a la salvación de Chad; ni hubo de acelerarse el pulso referido ni un ápice cuando, media hora más tarde, se encontró sentado con las piernas bajo la mesa de caoba de Chad, el señor Bilham a un lado, una amiga del señor Bilham al otro, el estupendo Waymarsh enfrente y el colosal rumor de París colándose con suavidad, con vaguedad —para Strether sin embargo ya resuelta dulzura— por las soleadas ventanas hacia las que, el día anterior, desde la calle, había dirigido las alas su curiosidad. El sentimiento que le había acompañado en aquel momento había fructificado casi con celeridad superior al tiempo para saborearlo, por lo que, en los restantes instantes, Strether intuía literalmente que había una suerte de precipitación en su destino. Mientras estuvo en la calle no había sabido nada ni conocido a nadie; ¿no había dado un salto su concepción de las cosas, sin embargo, en dirección a todos y todo?

«¿Qué hace aquí? ¿Qué hace aquí?» Algo parecido a esto sentía en la nuca todo el rato en relación con el menudo Bilham; pero mientras, hasta que lo descubriese, todos y todo estarían representados para él por el conjunto formado por su anfitrión y la dama de su izquierda. La dama de su izquierda, la dama tan urgente e ingeniosamente invitada a «conocer» al señor Strether y al señor Waymarsh —era la forma en que ella dio a entender su situación— era una notable personita, una persona que tenía mucho que ver con las preguntas que nuestro amigo se formulaba relativas a si la ocasión no sería en sustancia la más cebada, la más adornada de las trampas. Cebada podía con razón llamarse desde el momento en que la comida tenía un sabor tan acertado, y adornada, en relación con los objetos, imponíase por necesidad, sobre todo cuando la señorita Barrace —que éste era el nombre de la dama— les miraba con sus convexos ojos parisinos, a través de unos impertinentes de mango de carey notablemente largo. Por qué la señorita Barrace, madura, delgada, de buena complexión, muy alegre, muy adornada y de talante confianzudo, voluntariamente

inconsistente y que le recordaba uno de esos retratos del siglo pasado en que aparecía una astuta cabeza libre de maquillaje; por qué la señorita Barrace tenía que aparecer particularmente revestida de los rasgos de una «trampa» era cosa que Strether no habría sabido explicar en aquel instante; vacilaba ya a la luz de una convicción que había de apoderarse de él más tarde y sabía a la perfección, impregnado de ello, para el caso, con rotundidad, que dicha convicción le era necesaria. Se preguntaba qué tenía que pensar con exactitud de sus nuevos amigos; puesto que el joven, íntimo de Chad y embajador suyo, había, constituyendo así el conjunto de la escena, practicado con tanta mayor sutileza cuanto que rebasaba el límite de su predisposición, y dado asimismo que, en particular, la señorita Barrace, a las claras rodeada de todo tipo de consideración, no había tenido el menor escrúpulo en representar un papel. Le resultaba interesante advertir que se encontraba ante nuevas medidas, pautas distintas, una diferente escala de relaciones y que, a todas luces, había allí una feliz pareja que no pensaba en modo alguno como él y Waymarsh pensaban. Y eso que nada había sido menos calculado en aquel asunto que el hecho de que a la sazón le pareciese que él y Waymarsh estaban, en comparación, totalmente de acuerdo.

Este estaba radiante: afirmación por lo menos que le había formulado a él en particular la señorita Barrace.

—Oh, su amigo es un verdadero prototipo, el norteamericano colosal... no sé cómo definirlo. El profeta hebreo, Ezequiel, Jeremías, que cuando yo vivía de pequeña en la Rue Montaigne, solía ir a ver a mi padre y que por lo general era el Pastor Norteamericano de las Tullerías u otro sitio. Hace muchos años que no veo a uno de éstos; su sola presencia acariciaba mi triste corazón estremecido; es un espécimen maravilloso; en el lugar oportuno tendría un *succès fou.*

Strether no dejó de preguntar cuál era el lugar oportuno, tanto más cuanto que requería de toda su presencia de ánimo para encarar semejante mutación de esquemas.

—Oh, el barrio de los artistas y cosas así; vaya, *aquí,* por ejemplo, como usted mismo puede ver.

La voz de Strether se había levantado como un eco:

—«¿Aquí?» ¿Estamos en el barrio de los artistas? —Pero la mujer había resuelto ya el problema agitando los impertinentes y con un resuelto «¡que me lo pregunten a mí!» Supo en aquel preciso instante que no estaba en buena disposición de preguntar nada, pues la misma atmósfera se había vuelto por entonces densa y cargada, a juicio del pobre Waymarsh. Había caído en la trampa aún más que su compañero y, a diferencia de su compañero, sin sacar el mejor partido de la circunstancia; lo que precisamente le daba aquel talante sombrío suyo. Poco sospechaba la señorita Barrace que lo que se ocultaba tras ello era una severa apreciación de la ligereza femenina. La presunción con que nuestros dos amigos habían llegado allí había sido la de encontrar al señor Bilham dispuesto a llevarles hasta uno cualquiera de los resortes de la seriedad, la fraternidad estética que se contaba entre los espectáculos de París. En este sentido habrían tenido derecho a una conveniente insistencia tendente a descartar este objetivo. La única condición de Waymarsh, al cabo, había sido que nadie pagara por él; pero acabó encontrándose, según manifestaron los hechos, puntualmente pagado en una medida respecto de la que Strether, por su cuenta, descubrió que ya se había curado en salud. Strether, al otro lado de la mesa, era consciente de lo que ocurría en el interior de su amigo, consciente asimismo cuando pasaron a la salita a la que la noche anterior había aludido con tanto lujo de detalles; y más consciente que nunca cuando salieron al mirador respecto del que habría sido necesario ser un patán para no advertir que se trataba del lugar perfecto para gratas sobremesas. Sensación que se realzaba, en el caso de la señorita Barrace, gracias a una serie de excelentes cigarrillos —reconocidos y aclamados como parte del maravilloso bagaje dejado a su cuidado por Chad—, con una absorción casi igual a la que Strether se vio ciega y casi irracionalmente empujado. Podía perecer por la espada lo mismo que por hambre y sabía que su incitación de la dama mediante un exceso raro en él contaría bien poco en el conjunto —como Waymarsh habría podido añadir fácilmente— de la licenciosidad femenina. Waymarsh había fumado antiguamente y en buenas cantidades, pero a la sazón no lo hacía y esto le proporcionaba ciertas ventajas sobre las personas que se tomaban las cosas a la ligera precisamente cuando los demás las enfocaban con conocimiento de causa. Strether no había probado nunca el tabaco y se sentía como si alardease ante su amigo de que aquello había sido sólo a causa de un motivo. El motivo, ahora comenzaba a verlo claro, era que nunca había contado con ninguna dama con quien fumar.

Era sin embargo la presencia de la dama en aquel lugar lo que concentraba toda extrañeza, toda libertad; tal vez y puesto que ella se encontraba allí, el acto de fumar fuera la menor de sus libertades. Si Strether hubiera estado seguro en cada coyuntura de lo que —respecto de Bilham especialmente— ella enfocaba en su charla, sin duda habría seguido la pista de los demás temas y hecho una mueca de temor ante ellos, y sentido la mueca de Waymarsh; pero en realidad se encontraba tan a menudo en el mar que su sentido de la jerarquización referencial no pasaba de lo general y su arrostramiento de las distintas ocasiones la conjetura y la interpretación no rebasaban la duda. Se preguntaba lo que significarían ciertas

cosas, aunque cosas había de las que nunca había pensado que pudieran remitirse a otras, y «¡Oh, no... *eso* no!» era a la postre el más lucrativo resultado de sus sondeos. Fue éste el verdadero comienzo de una situación respecto de la que, tiempo después, como habrá de verse, encontraría un motivo para sobreponerse; y hubo de recordar el anodino instante como primer paso de un proceso. El dato fundamental del lugar no era ni más ni menos, si se analizaba —y bastaba un esfuerzo superficialque la básica impropiedad de la situación de Chad, alrededor de la cual parecían estar ellos cínicamente arracimados. En consecuencia, puesto que la daban por supuesta, daban por sentado todo lo que, en relación con aquélla, se daba por sentado en Woollett, asuntos respecto de los que, a decir verdad, había llegado Strether al último estadio del silencio con la señora Newsome. Así, se encontraba el resultado de una improbidad demasiado elevada para hablar de ella, y al mismo tiempo era el correlato de una profunda concepción de dicha improbidad. Vino a suceder, por consiguiente, que cuando el pobre Strether se planteó que la maldad referida era, en última instancia, o tal vez incluso en última insolencia, lo que una escena como la que tenía ante sus propias barbas había, por así decir, construido, apenas si pudo soslayar el dilema de auscultar un eco indirecto de aquellas presencias plurales en casi todo cuanto acontecía. Esto, y no le cabía la menor duda, era una espantosa necesidad; pero tal era la lógica inflexible, y esto apenas si alcanzaba a conjeturarlo, de una relación con la vida irregular.

Era la modalidad de la irregularidad de la vida que pesaba sobre Bilham y la señorita Barrace lo que constituía la clandestina y delicada maravilla. Estaba pronto a admitir que la relación de éstos con aquélla era por completo indirecta, pues de ser de otro modo, en el hombre, habría manifestado la grosería de los malos modales; no obstante, la cualidad indirecta no estaba en modo alguno en consonancia —y *esto* era evidentecon el gozoso disfrute de todas las cosas que se daba en Chad. Ambos hablaban de él repetidamente, invocando su buen nombre y su buen natural, y la peor de las confusiones de Strether consistió en creer que toda la serie de menciones suyas estaba encaminada a rendirle honores. Elogiaban su munificencia y aprobaban su gusto, y al hacer esto se colocaban, según pareció a Strether, en el auténtico suelo en que tales cosas florecían. El apuro final de nuestro amigo consistió en que poco a poco fue situándose junto a ellos y hubo un supremo instante en que, en relación con su traumático sentimiento, la rigidez de Waymarsh se le antojó verdaderamente impresionante. Una cosa estaba clara: comprendía que debía organizar sus ideas. Tenía que acercarse a Chad, tenía que esperarle, relacionarse con él, sobreponerse a él, aunque no debía despojarle de la facultad de ver las cosas como eran. Debía atraérselo y no recorrer por su cuenta el camino. En cualquier caso, debía aclararse respecto de lo que —de continuar haciendo aquello por conveniencia— todavía condonaba. Era sobre el detalle de esta cantidad —¿y qué podía ser el hecho sino mixtificador?— sobre el que Bilham y la señorita Barrace arrojaban tan escasa luz. Así estaban los cuatro.

II

Cuando llegó la señorita Gostrey un fin de semana, ella se lo hizo saber; fue a verla inmediatamente y sólo entonces pudo reforzar su cerco en torno de la idea de un castigo. Esta idea, sin embargo, estuvo por fortuna presente en él desde el momento en que cruzó el umbral del pequeño entresuelo del Quartier Marboeuf en que la mujer había reunido, según ella misma aseguró, recogiéndolos en un millar de vuelos y alegres caídas en picado, los adminículos del nido definitivo. El hombre se percató al instante de que allí y sólo allí encontraría el benéfico apoyo con cuya visión había subido por las escaleras de Chad. Tal vez se hubiera asustado un tanto ante la imagen de cuánto más habría de saber de sí mismo en aquel lugar si su amigo no se hubiera encontrado allí mismo para medir la longitud de su apetito. Los sólidos, atestados y pequeños aposentos de la mujer, casi en penumbras, según hubo de parecerle al principio, representaban con sus acumulaciones un supremo ajuste general a la oportunidad y las condiciones dadas. Doquiera que mirase veía un marfil antiguo, un antiguo brocado, y apenas sabía dónde situarse por miedo de cometer un error espacial. La vida de la inquilina se le antojó, en un pronto, más atribulada por la propiedad incluso que la de Chad o la señorita Barrace; minuciosas como se habían vuelto sus ojeadas al imperio de los «objetos», el que tenía delante le obligaba a dilatarlas; la voluptuosidad de la mirada y el orgullo de la vida tenían allí su templo, ciertamente. Era la profundidad más recóndita del santuario: tan oscura como la cueva de un pirata. En la oscuridad había reflejos de oro; sombras moradas en el núcleo del resplandor; objetos, todos ellos, que recibían a través de la muselina, con su enorme rareza, la luz de las bajas ventanas. No había claridad en su entorno salvo la de tratarse de objetos valiosos, y borraban la ignorancia masculina con su desprecio como una flor, en un gesto de libertad para con él, que le hubieran agitado bajo la nariz. Pero después de abarcar a su anfitriona con una intensa mirada supo, sin embargo, qué era lo que más le interesaba. El círculo en que se encontraban palpitaba de vida y cualquier pregunta formulada entre ambos

gozaría allí de una energía más floreciente que en cualquier otra parte. Una pregunta, en efecto, vino a formularse en cuanto trabaron los rudimentos de la primera conversación, ya que la respuesta masculina, acompañada de una leve risa, no tardó en surgir:

—Bueno, se han apoderado de mí.

Gran parte de la charla, en esta primera ocasión, consistió en el desarrollo de esta verdad. El hombre estaba muy contento de verla y le manifestó con toda franqueza de qué modo se le había revelado, que se puede vivir durante años sin una bendición insospechada, pero que para conocerla por fin bastan tres días o perderla para siempre. Ella era la bendición que se había convertido en necesidad masculina, ¿y qué mejor para probarlo que el hecho de que sin ella él se encontrase perdido?

—¿A qué se refiere? —preguntó ella con una ausencia de alarma que, rectificándole como si hubiera confundido la «época» de una de sus alhajas, le permitió entrever otra vez la cualidad de la desenvoltura femenina en medio del laberinto que él no había sino comenzado a recorrer—. ¿Qué es lo que, en nombre de todos los Pocock, ha hecho usted?

—Pues exactamente lo contrario de lo que tenía que hacer. Me he hecho un furibundo amigo del pequeño Bilham.

—Ah, ese tipo de cosas constituía la esencia de su caso y habría que haberlo tenido en cuenta desde el principio. —Fue sólo después de haber dicho esto cuando, en buena medida como si de un detalle se tratara, preguntó quién demonios era el pequeño Bilham. Cuando supo que era un amigo de Chad y que vivía provisionalmente en los aposentos de Chad en ausencia de éste, casi casi como si estuviera en función de Chad y al servicio de la causa de Chad, la mujer manifestó, empero, mayor interés—. ¿Le importaría que le echara un vistazo? Sólo una vez, ya me comprende —añadió.

—Oh, cuantas más veces mejor; es tan divertido... tan original.

—¿Y no le fastidia? —le espetó la señorita Gostrey.

—¡De ningún modo! Somos tan inmunes a eso de un modo tan absoluto... Se trata de algo que intuyo en buena medida, claro, porque la mitad de las veces no le entiendo; pero nuestro *modus vivendi* no se resiente por ello. Debe usted cenar conmigo a fin de conocerlo-prosiguió Strether—. Entonces comprenderá.

—¿Da usted cenas?

—Sí, en ello estoy. A eso es a lo que me refería.

Hasta la amabilidad de la mujer quedó asombrada.

—¿A que gasta usted demasiado dinero?

—No, mi querida señora, porque al parecer gastan muy poco. Pero sí a que lo hago para *ellos.* Tengo que mantenerme a distancia.

La mujer meditó unos instantes... y se echó a reír.

—¡El dinero que debe de estar gastándose usted... para tenerlo en poco! Pero debo mantenerme al margen, ser objetiva.

Por la expresión del hombre parecía que la mujer le estuviera fallando.

—¿No quiere conocerlos entonces? —Era casi como si la mujer hubiera desplegado una inesperada prudencia individual.

Ella vaciló.

—En primer lugar... ¿quiénes son ellos?

—Bueno, el pequeño Bilham, por empezar por él. —Pospuso por el momento a la señorita Barrace—. Y Chad, cuando venga, al que debe usted conocer sin que valgan las excusas.

—¿Cuándo vendrá?

—Cuando Bilham haya tenido ocasión de escribirle y de saber de mí, acerca de mí. Bilham, sin embargo —prosiguió—, informará favorablemente... favorablemente de cara a Chad. Esto hará que no tenga miedo de venir. Por consiguiente la necesito a usted más que nunca, ya sabe, a causa de mi talante brusco.

—Oh, ya se apañará usted muy bien respecto de su talante brusco. —La mujer era enteramente natural —. Sea cual fuere la velocidad a que usted corra, yo no digo nada.

—Pero —dijo Strether— si no me he quejado.

La mujer trastocó aquellas palabras.

—¿No se ha estado fijando en cosas de las que quejarse?

No obstante con pesar, el hombre le concedió en aquello toda la razón.

—Sin embargo, aún no he encontrado nada. —¿Acaso no hay nadie *con* él?

—¿Que me hayan presentado? —Strether se detuvo un momento—. ¿Cómo voy a saberlo? ¿Y qué me importa a mí?

—Oh, oh —fue un gorgoteo de risas femeninas. El hombre estaba realmente impresionado por el efecto que su broma había causado en ella. Ahora comprendía en qué medida quería que fuera una broma. *Ella,* sin embargo, comprendía más cosas. Pero quiso ocultarlas de momento—. ¿No ha obtenido más datos?

El hombre se esforzó por recordarlos.

—Bueno, tiene una casa encantadora.

—Ah, eso, en París —replicó ella en seguida— no demuestra nada. Mejor dicho, no niega ninguna demostración. Ellos, es decir, las personas afectadas por su misión, pueden muy bien haberla arreglado en lugar de él.

—Exactamente. Y fue en el preciso escenario de los arreglos donde Waymarsh y yo nos pusimos las botas comiendo.

—Oh, si se contiene usted para ponerse las botas comiendo en escenarios arreglados —replicó ella— es muy probable que se muera de hambre. —Con lo que le dedicó una sonrisa—. Tiene antee usted lo peor.

—Ah, tengo *de todo* ante mí. Pero según nuestra hipótesis, deberían ser sorprendentes.

—¡Y lo *son!* -dijo la señorita Gostrey—. Por lo tanto, como comprenderá —añadió—, no se encuentra usted totalmente desprovisto de datos. Han *sido,* en efecto, sorprendentes.

Para alcanzar algo comparativamente definido apareció por fin un parco auxilio, una breve ola por la que, por lo demás, un instante después, fue arrastrado el recuerdo.

—Mi joven admite, además, que constituyen la gran preocupación de nuestro amigo.

—¿Es esa la expresión que utiliza?

Strether se esforzó por recordar con mayor exactitud.

—No... no precisamente.

—¿Algo más vívido quizá? ¿Menos?

El hombre se había inclinado, tras ajustarse los lentes, sobre una serie de menudos objetos en una pequeña vitrina; al oír aquello se incorporó.

—Fue una simple alusión, pero a la expectativa como yo estaba, no dejó de chocarme. «Tremendo como es él, ya me comprendéis...»: tales fueron las palabras de Bilham.

—¿«Tremendo, ya me comprendéis...»? ¡Oh! —Con lo que la señorita Gostrey cambió de conversación. Parecía, no obstante, satisfecha—. Bueno, ¿qué más quiere usted?

El hombre echó una nueva ojeada a un par de *bibelots,* pero todo le hacía retroceder.

—Con todo, *es* como si desearan que yo lo tuviera siempre presente.

La mujer quedó intrigada.

— *Quoi donc?*

—Bueno, aquello de que hablo. La amenidad. Pueden aturdirle a uno con esto lo mismo que con cualquier otra cosa.

—Oh —respondió ella—, tendrá usted que visitarles. Quiero verles personalmente —añadió—. Me refiero al señor Bilham y al señor Newsome: primero el señor Bilham, naturalmente. Una sola vez: una vez cada uno; esto bastará. Pero cara a cara... durante media hora. ¿Qué hace el señor Chad —dijo acto seguido — en Cannes? Los hombres íntegros no van a Cannes con... bueno, con lo que usted sabe.

—¿De veras? —preguntó Strether con un interés por los hombres íntegros que divirtió a la mujer.

—No; a otros lugares sí, pero no a Cannes. Cannes es diferente. Cannes es mejor. Cannes es lo mejor. Quiero decir que constituye el contingente humano que se conoce... cuando se conoce. Y si *él* ha hecho esto, bueno, esto también representa una diferencia. Tiene que haber ido solo. Ella no puede estar con él.

—No tengo —admitió Strether en su debilidad— la menor idea. —Parecía muy probable lo que ella había dicho; pero, al cabo de un tiempo, el hombre estuvo en situación de contribuir a que la mujer recibiera una impresión más directa.

El encuentro con el pequeño Bilham tuvo lugar gracias a un diligente acuerdo establecido en la gran galería del Louvre; y cuando, encontrándose con su amiga y visitante ante uno de los magníficos Tizianos —el impresionante retrato de un joven de ojos grisazulados con un guante de singular dibujo—, se volvió y vio que el tercer miembro del grupo avanzaba desde el fondo de la cerúlea y dorada panorámica, tuvo la sensación de haber tomado las riendas. Había convenido con la señorita Gostrey —databa el acuerdo incluso de Chester— en visitar el Louvre una mañana y había aceptado la misma propuesta, independientemente, emitida por el pequeño Bilham, con quien ya había visitado el museo del Luxemburgo. La fusión de ambos planes no presentó ninguna dificultad y hubo de chocarle que, en compañía del pequeño Bilham, las dificultades, en general, desapareciesen.

—Oh, está muy bien... ¡es uno de *los nuestros!* -tuvo ocasión de murmurar la señorita Gostrey a su compañero al poco de las primeras formalidades; y Strether, mientras avanzaban y se detenían, cuando entre ambos parecía haberse materializado ya una inmediata homogeneidad en media docena de observaciones, Strether supo que se había percatado, casi con inmediatez, de lo que ella quería decir y lo tomó como otra señal de que tenía la sartén por el mango. Fue esto lo más placentero que pudo pensar de la inteligencia que a la sazón utilizaba como una adquisición propiciamente nueva. No habría sabido ni siquiera el día anterior lo que ella quería decir, esto es, si ciertamente quería decir, cosa que él suponía, que

todos eran unos norteamericanos sentimentales. No sin esfuerzo hubo de encarar —y rizando el rizo al máximo— el concepto del norteamericano sentimental en la medida en que el pequeño Bilham era sentimental. El joven era su primer espécimen; el espécimen le había confundido profundamente; ahora, sin embargo, hablase hecho algo de luz. Lo que le había afectado al principio había sido la chocante serenidad del pequeño Bilham, pero de manera inevitable, en su circunspección, la había enfocado como el rastro de una serpiente, la corrupción, como habría podido decir oportunamente, de Europa; dado que la rapidez con que ello se manifestó a la señorita Gostrey únicamente en calidad de pequeña forma particular de lo más antiguo que ellos conocían lo justificaba en el acto ante la óptica masculina también. Quería simpatizar con su espécimen con neta buena conciencia y esto lo permitía plenamente. Lo que había dejado perplejo a Strether era ni más ni menos que la forma —una forma tan absoluta— que el pequeño artista tenía de ser más norteamericano que nadie; pero a la sazón y por el momento, Strether hacía lo posible por acostumbrarse al hecho para enfocarlo desde una nueva perspectiva.

El amable joven, pues, se desenvolvía, según la primera impresión de Strether, en un mundo respecto del que no tenía prejuicios. Lo único que nuestro amigo echó en falta al instante era lo acostumbrado en el sentido de una ocupación aceptable. El pequeño Bilham tenía una ocupación, pero se trataba sólo de una ocupación en decadencia; era su falta de desasosiego, alarma y remordimiento en este sentido lo que facultaba su sensación de serenidad. Había ido a París para pintar: esto es, para sondear en profundidad este misterio; pero el estudio había sido para él tan fatal como podía concebirse y su capacidad productiva había disminuido en proporción con el incremento de su conocimiento. Strether había sabido por él que en el momento de conocerlo en los aposentos de Chad no había salvado de su naufragio más que su elegante inteligencia y su consolidado acostumbramiento a París. Hablaba de estas cosas con la misma cariñosa confianza y estaba suficientemente claro que, en conjunto, estaban a su disposición todavía. No dejaron de encantar a Strether durante la hora que pasaron en el Louvre, donde, a decir verdad, se le representaron como parte inseparable del aire denso e iridiscente, el hechizo del nombre, el esplendor del espacio, el color de los maestros. Sin embargo, estaban presentes doquiera que el joven se dirigiera y el día siguiente a la visita del Louvre se hicieron sentir, en el curso de otro paseo, en el itinerario de nuestros amigos. Había invitado a sus compañeros a cruzar el río con él, ofreciéndose a enseñarles su pobre morada; y esta pobre morada suya, que era muy pobre, confirió a su idiosincrasia, según Strether —las pequeñas indiferencias e independencias sublimes que habían chocado a éste como cosa original— una extraña y simpática dignidad. Vivía al final de un callejón al que se accedía por una calle antigua, pequeña y adoquinada, calle que, a su vez, desembocaba en una avenida nueva, larga y llana: tanto callejón como calle y avenida con una especie de pobreza social en común; y les hizo pasar al más bien frío, desnudo y pequeño estudio que había prestado a un compañero durante lo que durase su elegante ausencia. El compañero en cuestión era otro candoroso compatriota al que había puesto un telegrama diciendo que el té les estuviera esperando, «a toda costa»; y esta irreflexiva comida, el otro candoroso compatriota y la exótica vida improvisada, con sus bromas y sus vacíos, sus delicadas manchas de pintura y sus tres o cuatro sillas, su sobreabundancia de gusto y convicciones y su carencia de casi todo lo demás, fueron urdiendo de consuno la ocasión a cuyo hechizo parcial se rindió incondicionalmente nuestro héroe.

Le gustaron los candorosos compatriotas, de los que no tardaron en comparecer dos o tres más; le gustaron las delicadas manchas de pintura y la libre sindéresis, que implicaban referencias, naturalmente, implicaban entusiasmos y execraciones que le dejaron, como suele decirse, de una pieza; y le gustó, por encima de todo, la leyenda de la pobreza alegre y campechana, del acomodo mutuo, noblemente ensalzado hasta lo romántico, que pronto tuvo ocasión de presenciar. Los candorosos compatriotas manifestaban una ingenuidad, pensaba, que sobrepasaba incluso la ingenuidad de Woollett; eran pelirrojos y de piernas largas, eran pintorescos y excéntricos, divertidos y simpáticos; y llenaban el antro de su lenguaje vulgar, que nunca había percibido de manera tan notable como cuando sustituía la selecta jerga, tal se le antojaba, del arte contemporáneo. Pulsaban a fondo la lira estética: de ella sacaban melodías maravillosas. El cariz de su vida tenía una admirable inocencia; y observaba de vez en cuando a María Gostrey para ver en qué medida le había afectado el fenómeno. No le dio la mujer, sin embargo, por el momento, y como ya había ocurrido el día anterior, más muestras que las que manifestaban de qué manera trataba a los jóvenes; comportándose ante ellos con el aire de experimentado avezamiento parisino que mantenía ante todos y ante todo. Estupenda respecto de las manchas delicadas, autoritaria respecto de la manera de hacer té, confiada en relación con las patas de las sillas y cordial rememoradora de aquellos que, en otra época comentada, realzada o caricaturizada, habían florecido o fracasado, desaparecido o surgido, la mujer había aceptado con su mejor disposición el segundo examen del pequeño Bilham y había dicho a Strether durante la tarde anterior, cuando éste se separó de ellos, que puesto que sus impresiones iban a sufrir una revisión, se reservaba el veredicto hasta la consulta de la nueva prueba.

La nueva prueba se presentó al cabo de un par de días, al parecer. No tardó en recibir de María un

mensaje notificándole que le habían cedido un magnífico palco en el «Français» para la noche siguiente; pareciendo en tales ocasiones que ser objeto de tales atenciones no era el menor de los méritos de la mujer. La sensación de que ella anticipaba siempre los favores sólo se compensaba, respecto de Strether, por la sensación de ver de qué manera salía siempre retribuida; todo lo cual antojábasele a su conciencia, en un sentido lato, como un tráfico bullicioso y animado, el manejo de cuyo intercambio de valores no le había sido dado. Sabía que ella, respecto de las representaciones teatrales francesas, lo detestaba todo salvo los palcos, del mismo modo que, respecto de las inglesas, todo lo detestaba salvo las butacas, y un palco era precisamente lo que él se maliciaba ya para influir cerca de la mujer. Pero el caso era que ésta presentaba cierta semejanza con el pequeño Bilham; también era ella de los que manifestaban un conocimiento previo respecto de los temas importantes. Cosa que constantemente le otorgaba ventaja sobre él y daba al hombre ocasión de preguntarse cómo estarían las cuentas de ambos en el día de la liquidación. No escatimó esfuerzos por simplificar las cosas un poco conviniendo con ella en que si él aceptaba la invitación femenina ella tendría que cenar con él antes; pero el resultado de tanto escrúpulo fue que a las ocho en punto del día siguiente estaba esperándola con Waymarsh bajo la columnata del pórtico. Ella no había cenado con él y era característico de su relación que le obligara a aceptar las negativas femeninas sin comprender una palabra el final. Siempre se las ingeniaba ella para que sus ulteriores reestructuraciones de las cosas ya convenidas pareciesen al hombre tiernos detalles para con él. Fue basándose en este principio por lo que, verbigracia, para dar al hombre la oportunidad de volver a mostrarse cordial con el pequeño Bilham, le había sugerido que ofreciera al joven un asiento del palco. Strether había despachado, a este fin, un breve recado azul al Boulevard Malesherbes, pero en el momento de entrar en el teatro aún no había recibido respuesta. Sostenía, sin embargo, incluso después de llevar un buen rato convenientemente instalados, que el amigo común, puesto que conocía su ubicación, aparecería en el momento preciso. Su ausencia temporal, por lo demás, parecía, con mayor fuerza si cabe, respecto de la señorita Gostrey, pautar dicho momento preciso. Strether había esperado hasta aquella noche para obtener de ella, de modo acaso especular, impresiones y conclusiones. La mujer había querido, como suele decirse, dar una ojeada al pequeño Bilham, pero a la sazón resultaba que las ojeadas habían sido dos y que, pese a todo, aún no había abierto la boca.

Waymarsh estaba sentado al otro lado, la anfitriona en el centro, y la señorita Gostrey se describía a sí misma como instructora de la juventud, deslizando sus pequeños ataques a una obra que era una de las glorias de la literatura. La gloria era, felizmente, incuestionable, y los pequeños ataques sobresalían por su candidez. Por lo que a ella respectaba, había recorrido ya sus buenos trechos y se limitaba a confiar en la inocencia del prójimo. Pero vino a referirse a su debido tiempo al amigo ausente, al que estaba claro que tendrían que renunciar.

—O no ha recibido su billete o usted no ha recibido el suyo. Tiene que haberle surgido alguna dificultad, aunque, naturalmente, como comprenderán, un hombre no va a escribir una nota diciendo que va a acudir a un palco —y lo dijo como si, a juzgar por su aspecto, pudiera haber sido Waymarsh el que había escrito al joven, por lo que el rostro del hombre manifestaba una combinación de sobriedad y angustia. La mujer prosiguió, sin embargo, como si quisiera justificar la situación—. Es con mucho, ya lo sabe usted, el mejor de todos.

—¿Quiénes son todos, señora?

—Bueno, todo ese largo cortejo de chicos y muchachos, o de ancianos y ancianas como a veces son en el fondo; la esperanza, que podría decirse, de nuestra patria. Año tras año han estado viniendo, pero no ha habido ninguno en particular a quien yo haya tenido deseos de detener. Creo que tengo deseos de detener al pequeño Bilham: *¿usted* no? Está tan en su sitio... —La mujer seguía dirigiéndose a Waymarsh—. Es muy agradable. ¡Si al menos no lo echara a perder! Pero siempre *quieren* hacerlo; siempre lo hacen; siempre tienen que hacerlo.

—No creo que Waymarsh esté muy al tanto —dijo Strether al cabo de un momento— de lo que es dado echar a perder a Bilham.

—No puede tratarse del buen norteamericano-respondió Waymarsh con cierta lucidez—, pues no me consta que el joven haya avanzado mucho en *ese* sentido.

—Ah —exclamó la señorita Gostrey— el calificativo de buen norteamericano se otorga con tanta facilidad como se quita. ¿En qué consiste, en primer lugar, *ser* un buen norteamericano y a qué se debe esta prisa tan extraordinaria? Sin lugar a dudas, nada tan apremiante estuvo nunca tan poco definido. Es un encargo de tal índole, a decir verdad, que para preparar un plato hay que tener cuando menos la receta del destinatario. Además, los pobres polluelos tienen tiempo. Lo que tan a menudo he visto que se echaba a perder —continuó— era la actitud de felicidad en sí misma, el estado de fe... ¿cómo decirlo?, el sentido de la belleza. Tiene usted razón respecto de él —la mujer se dirigía ahora a Strether—, el pequeño Bilham los tiene encandilados; tenemos que conservar al pequeño Bilham. —Acto seguido se dirigió otra vez a Waymarsh—: Los demás han querido desesperadamente hacer algo y en muchos casos, en excesivos casos,

se han puesto y lo han hecho, ciertamente. Esto hace que después nunca sean los mismos; sin saber por qué, el encanto acaba perdiéndose siempre. Ahora bien: *a él,* me parece a mí, no le ocurrirá esto. No se propone hacer nada del otro mundo. Siempre disfrutaremos de su compañía tal como es ahora. Es francamente extraordinario. Lo comprende todo. No siente ni una pizca de vergüenza. Está pertrechado con todo el valor que podría exigírsele. Sólo piensa en lo que *tal vez* haga. Se querría tener siempre a la vista por miedo de algún accidente. ¿En qué brete podría encontrarse, quizá, en este momento? Ya he tenido mis desilusiones: hay cosas que nunca están a salvo; o sólo lo están cuando se vigilan. Nunca se puede confiar en ellas del todo. Una es nerviosa y creo que ése es el motivo por el que le echamos tanto de menos en este instante.

La mujer había rematado con una carcajada de alegría la trama de lo que pensaba, una alegría que su rostro comunicó a Strether, que sin embargo habría deseado en aquel momento que la mujer se desentendiera del pobre Waymarsh. *El* sabía más o menos lo que ella quería decir, pero la vacilación no justificaba el femenino fingimiento ante Waymarsh de que el hombre nada sabía. Acaso fuera una muestra de cobardía, pero le habría gustado, en nombre de la elevada amenidad de la presente circunstancia, que Waymarsh no estuviera tan seguro de su ingenio. La apercepción femenina del mismo ponía al hombre en evidencia y, sin que ella hubiera de tener nada con él ni con aquel detalle, las cosas empeorarían. De todos modos, ¿qué pretendía? Miró a su amigo, al otro lado del palco; se encontró la mirada de ambos; un no sé qué misterioso y frío, un algo que pesaba sobre la situación, pero que era mejor no sacar a relucir, pasó en silencio entre ellos. Bueno, el resultado final fue que Strether tuvo una reacción brusca, un estallido de impaciencia de su propia tendencia a contemporizar. ¿A dónde le estaba llevando aquello? Era uno de esos calmos instantes que a veces plantean más cuestiones que esas rupturas de hostilidades, tan queridas de la musa de la historia. La única cualificación de aquel sosiego era el sinóptico «¡Oh, demonios!» en que germinaba sigilosamente la porción de silencio de Strether. Representaba, esta muda exclamación, un impulso final de quemar sus naves. Es posible que estas naves parecieran simples cascarones de nuez a la musa de la historia, pero cuando se dirigió a la señorita Gostrey fue con la sensación de aproximar por fin la antorcha.

—¿Se trata entonces de una conspiración?

—¿Entre los dos jóvenes? Bueno, no me las doy de vidente ni de profetisa —respondió ella—; pero o yo soy mujer de juicio o él le está haciendo a usted un favor esta noche. No sé exactamente cómo... pero lo presiento. —Y se le quedó mirando como si, por poco que fuera el material que le entregaba, el hombre hubiera de comprender—. Por lo menos es *lo* que yo pienso. Él le entiende a usted demasiado bien para no hacerlo.

—¿Para no hacerme un favor esta noche? —preguntó Strether—. Entonces espero que no le salga mal.

—Ha caído usted en sus manos muy aprisa —replicó ella con mal presagio.

—¿Quiere usted decir que él...?

—Está usted en manos de ellos —se limitó a repetir la mujer. Aunque ésta hubiese renunciado a la visión profética, era en aquel instante lo más parecido a la sacerdotisa del oráculo que el hombre había tenido delante en toda su vida. Los ojos femeninos irradiaban luz—. Debe usted darse cuenta de la situación sin tardanza.

La captó en aquel preciso momento.

—¿Es que ellos *habían* preparado...?

—Todos y cada uno de los movimientos del juego. Y lo han venido haciendo desde entonces. Todos los días recibe su escueto telegrama desde Cannes.

Aquello hizo que se dilataran los ojos de Strether.

— ¿*Sabe* usted eso?

—Y mucho más. Lo comprendo. Por eso me preguntaba yo, antes de conocerle, si podría comprender. Pero nada más conocerle dejé de lado las preguntas y durante el segundo encuentro se confirmaron mis sospechas. Entendí su actitud totalmente. Ha estado siguiendo, todavía sigue, las instrucciones diarias de él.

—¿De modo que es Chad quien lo ha organizado todo?

—Oh, no, todo no. *Nosotros* hemos aportado un poco. Usted, yo y Europa.

—Europa... sí —murmuró Strether meditabundo.

—El querido y viejo París —dijo ella a modo de explicación, al parecer. Pero aún había más y, en uno de sus giros, lo aventuró—. Y el querido y viejo Waymarsh. Usted —afirmó— ha puesto su buena parte de ello.

El aludido estaba impresionante.

—¿Una buena parte en qué, señora?

—Bueno, en la maravillosa conciencia de aquí, nuestro amigo. También usted ha contribuido, a su modo, a llevarlo por los aires adonde está ahora.

—¿Y dónde demonios está ahora?

La mujer acogió aquello con una carcajada.

—¿Dónde demonios estás, Strether?

El hombre lo dijo como si hubiera puesto en palabras su pensamiento.

—Bueno, exactamente, ya en manos de Chad, por lo que parece. —Con lo que se le ocurrió algo más—. ¿Será así, por mediación de Bilham, como lo habrá planeado? Esto vendría a ser tanto como una ocurrencia. Y, ya me entiende, Chad con ocurrencias...

—¿Sí? —preguntó la mujer mientras él seguía cavilando en aquella representación.

—Bueno, ¿es Chad... lo que podríamos llamar un monstruo?

—Oh, todo lo que usted quiera. Pero la ocurrencia de que usted habla —dijo ella— no le habrá dejado vacío. Aún tendrá ideas mejores. Y no las llevará todas a cabo por mediación del pequeño Bilham.

Aquello le sonó ya casi como una esperanza destruida. —¿Mediante quién más entonces?

—Eso es lo que habrá que ver. —Pero al tiempo que decía esto, la mujer volvió la cabeza y Strether hizo lo propio; pues la puerta del palco se había abierto, con el taconeo de la *ouvreuse* en el pasillo, y un caballero, desconocido para todos, había entrado con paso rápido. La puerta se cerró a sus espaldas y, aunque el rostro de los tres evidenció al recién llegado su propia confusión, su aspecto, que era chocante, respiraba absoluta confianza. El telón acababa de levantarse otra vez y, en medio del siseo que llamaba a la atención general, el desafío de Strether fue tácito, como también lo fue su recibimiento, con mano y sonrisa rápidas y desaprobadoras, del inesperado visitante. Este indicó por señas, muy discretamente, que esperaría, que se quedaría de pie, y estas cosas más su rostro, un vislumbre del cual había captado ella, habían bastado a la señorita Gostrey. La mujer se las ingenió para responder a la última pregunta de Strether. La respuesta era, sencillamente, el formal recién llegado, según indicó en aquel momento, volviéndose a su amigo. Se lo dijo sin ambages y esto presentó al intruso—. Bueno, por mediación de este caballero. —El caballero, a decir verdad, al mismo tiempo que pronunciaba ante Strether un nombre muy breve, hacía otro tanto por explicarse. Strether balbució aquel nombre: sólo entonces comprendió. La señorita Gostrey había dicho más de lo que sabía. Estaban en presencia del mismísimo Chad.

Nuestro amigo recordaría continuamente aquella circunstancia tiempo después: recordaría en realidad gran parte del tiempo que pasaron juntos, y pasaron juntos, sin separarse un instante, tres o cuatro días: le había afectado con tanta intensidad durante aquella primera media hora que todo lo que ocurrió después fue, en comparación, una secuela menor. El caso fue que su apercepción de la identidad del joven —tan minuciosamente comprobada durante un minuto— había sido ni más ni menos que una de esas sensaciones que marcan una vida; a decir verdad no había conocido ninguna que hubiese funcionado, según él mismo habría dicho, con más concurrido bullicio. Y el bullicio, aunque al tiempo difuso y multitudinario, había durado mucho tiempo, protegido como estuvo y a la vez agravado por la circunstancia de coincidir con un período de decoroso silencio. No podían hablar sin molestar a los espectadores de la parte del paraíso que tenían debajo; con lo que, si a ello vamos, ocurriósele a Strether —pues ésta era la clase de cosas que se le ocurría— que aquellos eran los accidentes de una alta civilización; el tributo necesario a la propiedad, la frecuente sujeción a condiciones, normalmente brillante, en que la exención tiene que esperar su tiempo. La exención nunca estaba al alcance de los reyes, las reinas, los actores y gentes parecidas, y aunque uno no resultara ser uno de éstos, podía adivinarse, a poco que se llevase una vida llena de tensiones, lo que de vez en cuando sentían. Era ciertamente una vida llena de tensiones lo que Strether había creído llevar mientras se encontraba en aquel palco, muy cerca de Chad, durante la prolongada emoción del acto. Estaba en presencia de un hecho que ocupaba la totalidad de su intelecto, que precisó durante media hora la absoluta atención de todos sus sentidos a la vez; pero no podía manifestar nada sin caer en la inconveniencia, cosa que, por otro lado, podía considerarse en realidad una suerte. Lo que hubiera manifestado de haber manifestado algo era exactamente la clase de emoción —la emoción del aturdimiento— que desde el principio se había propuesto manifestar menos, ocurriera lo que ocurriese. El fenómeno que repentinamente había caído sobre él era un fenómeno de transformación tan absoluta que su imaginación, puesta en funcionamiento con notable anticipación, se sintió, en el contacto, sin margen ni concesiones. Había afrontado toda contingencia, salvo que Chad no fuera Chad, y era esto lo que a la sazón tenía que arrostrar con una simple sonrisa tirante y un rubor molesto.

Se preguntó si, por casualidad, antes de que tuviera que comprometerse de algún modo, podría ajustar sus facultades intelectuales a la nueva imagen, si podría habituarse, por así decir, a la extraordinaria verdad. Oh, pero era tan extraordinaria esta verdad; pues ¿qué podía ser más extraordinario que aquella brusca ruptura de identidad? A un hombre se le trataba en tanto que era él mismo: no se le podía tratar como si fuera otro. Constituía un pequeño remanso de paz, por otro lado, verse obligado a preguntarse por lo poco que el otro podría saber de un acontecimiento tal que la suma final estuviera representada por ese otro. No podía no saber nada en absoluto pues no se podía ocultar absolutamente todo. Era pues un caso, así de sencillo, un caso dramático, como en la actualidad suele llamarse a tales hechos, un caso de

transformación sin igual y cuya esperanza no radicaba, por regla general, sino en que los casos dramáticos son propensos al gobierno exterior. Es posible que él, Strether, fuera la única persona, al fin y al cabo, consciente del hecho. Ni siquiera la señorita Gostrey, con toda su ciencia, se había percatado —¿se habría percatado?— y, en cuanto a Waymarsh, jamás había visto a nadie menos consciente de nada, mientras observaba a Chad con el ceño fruncido. La ceguera social del meticuloso repaso que llevaba a cabo el viejo amigo volvió a señalarle, y casi de modo humillante, los inevitables límites de la ayuda directa de aquel lado. No estaba seguro, sin embargo, de no obtener una brizna de compensación del privilegio, no obstante sin paladear todavía, de saber más a propósito de algo en particular que la señorita Gostrey. Su situación se parecía demasiado a un caso, si a ello vamos, y a la sazón estaba interesado, sentía tan intensa curiosidad íntima al respecto que ya tenía un ojo puesto en el regocijo que se daría cuando después se lo revelara a la mujer. No recibió, durante aquella media hora, ningún auxilio de ella y este solo hecho femenino de rehuir la mirada masculina jugó un pequeño papel, necesario es confesarlo, en los apuros del hombre.

Había presentado a Chad, durante los primeros minutos, en voz baja y en ningún momento advirtió en la mujer la gazmoñería de la persona que ignora; pero también es verdad que durante un buen rato no tuvo ella ojos más que para el escenario, donde de vez en cuando encontraba un pretexto para una apreciación que invitaba a Waymarsh a compartir. La capacidad participadora de éste jamás había afrontado, en modo alguno, un asalto de aquella índole; siendo este cercamiento del hombre lo más acusado de aquella premeditada actitud, de parte de la mujer, según calculaba Strether, tendente a apartar del natural trato compartido a Chad y a él mismo. Dicho trato, mientras tanto, se veía reducido a las francas y amistosas expresiones del joven, notablemente parecidas a la sonrisa, pero sin caer en la gesticulación abierta, y a la animosidad de la especulación interior de Strether respecto de si se estaba comportando como un idiota. No veía exactamente cómo se podía sentir de aquella manera sin manifestarse como tal de alguna manera. Lo peor de la cuestión, además, era que consideraba ya un síntoma la intuición de lo que le turbaba. «Si voy a mantenerme odiosamente atento a mi posibilidad de llamar la atención de este sujeto —se decía—, será tan poco lo que exteriorice que muy bien podré detenerlo antes de que surja». Esta sabia consideración, por otro lado, parecía manifiestamente no tener en cuenta el hecho de que iba a estar atento. En realidad prestaba atención a todo menos a lo que le hubiera servido de algo.

Habría de enterarse después, durante las vigilias de la noche, de que nada había tenido más a mano, tras un par de minutos, que proponer a Chad que saliera con él al pasillo. No sólo no se lo había propuesto, sino que además había carecido incluso de presencia de ánimo para estimar posible la circunstancia. Se había quedado clavado allí como un colegial, ansioso de no perderse ni un minuto de la función; aunque para el fragmento de función hasta entonces ofrecido no había tenido en realidad ni un instante de atención. Cuando cayó el telón no habría podido dar ni el menor dato de lo ocurrido. Además y por consiguiente, no se había dado cuenta en aquel momento del toque de amenidad proporcionado por la aceptación de su incomodidad ante la paciencia general de Chad. ¿No había sabido pese a todo, al mismo tiempo —estúpidamente y sin reacciones—, que el joven estaba transigiendo con algo? Era amable con modestia, el joven: por lo menos había sido capaz de ello, de la superioridad de descubrir su oportunidad de serlo; y nadie que estuviera en sus cabales tendría, literalmente, el sentido común de tomarle la delantera. Si tuviéramos que adentrarnos en todo lo que ocupaba a nuestro amigo durante las vigilias nocturnas acabaría estropeándosenos la pluma; pero un par de ejemplos bastarán para representarnos con qué viveza llegaba a recordar. Recordaba dos sinsentidos que, si bien su presencia de ánimo le había fallado, eran las cosas que más habían tenido que ver con ello. Jamás había visto a un joven entrar en un palco a las diez de la noche y si se le hubiera planteado la cuestión de antemano apenas si se habría sentido dispuesto a pronunciarse por distintos modos de hacerlo; pero resultaba, a pesar de esto, definitivo para él que Chad hubiera optado por una modalidad que había sido maravillosa: un hecho que conllevaba la implicación de que, como era de esperar, él sabía, había aprendido, cómo.

Por entonces había ya abundantes resultados; el joven, en aquel mismo instante y sin la menor problemática intencional, había enseñado a Strether que, aun tratándose de una menudencia como aquella, había diferentes modalidades. Había hecho, sin abandonar esta tendencia, algo más que esto; mediante un par de movimientos de cabeza había hecho que su viejo amigo observara que quizá lo más perceptible en él fuera el cambio, los acusados mechones grises, sorprendentes a su edad, en medio de la espesa madeja de pelo negro; así como que este nuevo rasgo le sentaba curiosamente bien, le añadía un no sé qué, como una caracterización, también incluso como —de todo lo del mundo— un refinamiento, que se hubiera buscado con pertinacia. Stréther intuía, sin embargo, que habría tenido que confesar que no habría sido fácil en aquel preciso momento, a propósito de esta y otras apreciaciones, y en vista de lo que se había aportado, tener las ideas claras respecto de lo que se había descuidado. Una reflexión que un crítico inocente habría podido hacer de antiguo, por ejemplo, era que habría sido más afortunado para el hijo parecerse más a la madre; pero era ésta una reflexión que en el presente no se habría dado. La ocasión había desaparecido, no

obstante no haber acaecido ningún tipo de parecido con la madre. Difícil habría sido para el rostro y el aspecto de un joven disociarse con mayor entereza que los de Chad en esta coyuntura de cualquier diferenciable, de cualquier imaginable rasgo de una madre neoinglesa. Esto, naturalmente, no era más de lo que se había dado en las tarjetas postales; pero provocó en Strether, a pesar de todo, uno de esos frecuentes fenómenos de referencia mental de que todo criterio suyo estaba realmente plagado.

Una y otra vez, a medida que pasaban los días, le asaltaba la sensación de que se volvía pertinente comunicarse rápidamente con Woollett: comunicarse con una rapidez con que sólo el telégrafo podía casar; fruto, a decir verdad, de una delicada fantasía suya, tendente a mantener las cosas derechas para la feliz prevención del error. Nadie sabría explicarse mejor cuando fuese necesario ni poner más gramos de conciencia en un inventario o un informe; cuya carga de conciencia quizá fuera, precisamente, la razón por la que su corazón se hundía cada vez que las nubes de la explicación se concentraban. Su mayor ingenuidad consistía en mantener el cielo de la vida despejado de nubes. Si su concepción de las luces era grandiosa o no, el caso es que sostenía que nada podía explicarse jamás, y sin ninguna excepción. Uno avanzaba mediante vanos movimientos, pero esto era, en términos generales, un derroche de vida. Una relación personal era una relación sólo mientras las personas se comprendían a la perfección o, lo que era todavía mejor, no se preocupaban por ello. Desde el momento en que se preocupaban es que comenzaba a vivirse con el sudor de la propia frente; y el sudor de la propia frente no era más que lo que uno podía sobornar de sí mismo manteniendo el terreno limpio de la cizaña del engaño. Ésta no tardaba en crecer fácilmente y únicamente un cable transatlántico era lo que podía competir con ella en velocidad. Este mecanismo le habría dado fe cotidiana de algo que no sería lo que Woollett habría argüido. No estaba totalmente seguro de que el efecto de la apreciación de la crisis, formulada al día siguiente —o más bien durante la noche—, no hubiera de determinar una breve misiva. «Por fin lo has visto, pero ¡oh, querido!»: consuelos pasajeros de este tenor parecían flotar ante él. Flotaban de algún modo para prepararlos a todos, aunque ¿prepararlos para qué? De poder ganar en claridad y terrenalidad, lo habría expresado con cuatro palabras: «asombrosamente viejo —pelo gris». A este detalle particular del aspecto de Chad se había remitido constantemente durante su media hora de mutismo; como si en ello hubiera habido más cosas de las que habría podido decir. Lo máximo que habría podido decir habría sido: «¡Si hasta va a hacer que me sienta joven...!», lo que, ciertamente, no era poco. Es decir, que si Strether iba a sentirse joven ello sería porque Chad iba a sentirse viejo; y un pecador viejo y avezado no coincidía con ninguna de las premisas.

La cuestión del verdadero tiempo vital de Chadwick fue sin duda lo que con mayor rapidez se planteó tras el intervalo compartido, cuando terminó la representación, hasta cierto café de la Avenue de l'Opéra. La señorita Gostrey se había comportado estupendamente en aquel trance; se había dado cuenta exacta de lo que ambos querían: ir derechos a algún sitio y hablar; y Strether había intuido incluso que la mujer había compredido lo que él quería decir y que se estaba preparando para comenzar sin más dilaciones. No se trataba de una simulación de la mujer, como sí *había* simulado, por otra parte, que adivinaba el deseo de Waymarsh de prodigarle una independiente protección hasta su casa; Strether, pese a todo, se dio cuenta, una vez que Chad se hubo sentado ante él a una pequeña mesa de los brillantes salones que su compañero había elegido sin vacilar, tajante y desembarazadamente diferenciados de los demás, de que era exactamente, para su imaginación, como si la mujer le oyera hablar; como si, encontrándose a más de un kilómetro de distancia, en el pisito que ya conocía el hombre, pudiera escuchar ella con atención suficiente para captarlo todo. Se percató asimismo de que le gustaba aquella idea y deseó que, en virtud de un idéntico dispositivo, la señora Newsome se enterase de todo también. Pues lo que en primer lugar había acabado por configurarse en él como una necesidad de primer orden no era perder otra hora, ni siquiera una fracción de la misma; era avanzar arrolladoramente y con ímpetu. Era esta la manera como se anticiparía —por medio de un ataque nocturno, tal vez—, a cualquier forzada madurez que una precipitada conciencia de París tuviese la previsible osadía de atribuir a la conducta del joven. Conocía plenamente, por lo que había oído decir a la señorita Gostrey, las señales de alerta de Chad; pero éstas constituían el mejor motivo para no perder el tiempo. Si, además, se le iba a tratar como a un joven, él no lo sería en modo alguno, cuando menos, antes de ponerse de una vez a repartir los golpes. Podían detenerle los brazos, pero ya se ha hecho constar que tenía cincuenta años. La importancia de esto, a decir verdad, había comenzado a experimentarla antes de que abandonaran el teatro; se había convertido en un hostigante desasosiego que le impelía a aprovechar la ocasión. Apenas si había podido contenerse al salir; estaba al borde de la indecencia de abordar la cuestión en plena calle; se vio obligado pues a proseguir en nombre de la honradez —así lo expresaría después con envidia— como si no fuera a haber otra oportunidad si la presente se le escapaba. Hasta que no sacó a relucir las palabras precisas, sentado en el diván morado y ante el *bock* baladí, no estuvo seguro, si bien se mire, de que con la presente bastaría.

Libro cuarto

I

—He venido, bien lo sabes, para que rompas con todo, ni más ni menos y vuelvas derecho a casa; de modo que harás bien en considerarlo inmediata y favorablemente. —Strether, frente por frente de Chad, luego de la representación, había pronunciado estas palabras casi sin aliento y con un efecto que al principio sólo desconcertó francamente a él mismo. Pues la actitud pasiva de Chad era la de la persona que ha permanecido generosamente inmóvil mientras el mensajero que al fin le alcanza ha estado corriendo un kilómetro por el polvo. Segundos después de haber hablado, Strether se sentía como si hubiera sido *él* quien había hecho un prolongado esfuerzo; ni siquiera estaba seguro de que el sudor no le cubriera la frente. Se trataba de esa clase de conciencia a cuyo tenor tenía que agradecer la mirada que, mientras durase la tensión, los ojos del joven le dirigían. Reflejaban éstos, y lo grande del caso era que lo hacían con una especie de bondad tímida, su estado transitoriamente agitado; hecho que provocó a su vez, en nuestro amigo, el despunte de un temor a que Chad, sencillamente, «dedujera» —lo dedujera todo— mostrándose apenado por él. Un miedo de aquella índole —el miedo que fuera— resultaba desagradable. Pero todo era desagradable; era extraño comprobar el repentino vuelco de las cosas. Esto, sin embargo, no era razón para permitir que las cosas siguieran. Un minuto después se conducía Strether tan resueltamente como si tuviera algo que sacar de aquello.

—Por supuesto, soy un entrometido, si es que quieres llevar el caso hasta ese extremo; pero, al fin y al cabo, lo soy en el sentido de que te he conocido y te presté toda la atención que amablemente me permitiste cuando andabas con pantalón corto. Sí, en pantalón corto, soy lo suficientemente entrometido para acordarme de ello y también de que, para tu edad, y hablo de tiempos ya lejanos, tenías unas piernas enormemente fuertes. Bueno, el caso es que queremos que dejes esto. Tu madre lo desea de todo corazón, aunque por encima de todo esto, ella tenga más y mejores argumentos y motivos. Y no por mi culpa: no necesito recordarte que es persona que no necesita influencias externas. Pero también los hay por lo que a mí respecta, con lo que aprovecho para decirte que debes considerarme tanto amigo de tu madre como tuyo. Ni me los he inventado ni los maquiné al principio; pero los comprendo, creo que hasta podría explicarlos: y me gustaría inducirte con todas mis fuerzas a que les hicieras justicia; ya ves, por eso estoy aquí. Era mejor que supieras lo peor en seguida. Es cuestión de ruptura inmediata e inmediato regreso. Se me agasajó lo suficiente para creer que podía dorar la píldora. De cualquier modo, tengo sumo interés en este asunto. Ya lo tenía antes de salir de casa; y no me importa decirte que, cambiado como estás, lo tengo aún más ahora que te he visto. Estás más viejo y, no sé cómo decirlo, más de una pieza; pero, si no me equivoco, también más capacitado para lo que nos proponemos.

—¿Te parece que he mejorado? —había de recordar Strether que Chad, en aquel punto, había preguntado.

Había de recordar asimismo —y hubo de transcurrir un tiempo para tranquilidad suya— que le había sido «dado», como decían en Woollett, responder con cierta presencia de ánimo:

—No tengo la menor idea. —A decir verdad, se sintió complacido de considerar durante un rato que se había comportado con franca dureza. En lo tocante a admitir que Chad había mejorado de aspecto, pero que en lo relativo a aspectos las observaciones debían ser limitadas, comprobó que comprometía y dejaba al descubierto sus reservas. No sólo su sentido moral, sino también, si a ello vamos, su sentido estético tuvieron que transigir un tanto en esta cuestión, pues Chad, sin que cupiera la menor duda —¿y no se trataba otra vez del condenado pelo gris?— estaba más guapo de lo que habría podido esperarse en él. Esto, sin embargo, cuadraba a la perfección con lo que Strether había dicho. No tenían ellos el menor deseo de restringir su debida expansión y no iba a convenir él menos a los fines de ellos por no parecer, como a menudo había sido el caso desde mucho tiempo atrás, únicamente temerario y salvaje. Había, no obstante, una señal particular por la que él se aproximaría a las claras a la anterior prospección. Strether, mientras hablaba, no comprendía muy bien sus propios términos; sólo sabía que se había aferrado a su hilo discursivo y que cada momento que pasaba lo sujetaba con mayor firmeza; su sencilla ausencia de interrupciones, durante cinco minutos, le ayudó a hacer esto. Desde hacía un mes repasaba con frecuencia lo que había de decir en la presente circunstancia y al cabo le parecía que no decía nada de cuanto había pensado: tan absolutamente diferente era todo.

A pesar de esto había hecho tremolar sus pendones. No había dejado de hacerlo y hubo un minuto en que se sintió como si los hubiera agitado con energía, como si los hubiera sacudido con un zarandeo supremo en las mismísimas barbas de su compañero. Cosa que, en realidad, casi le dio la sensación de haber cumplido ya su cometido. El alivio momentáneo —como surgido de la convicción de que nada de *aquello*

podía dar marcha atrás— brotó de una causa específica, la causa que se había puesto en vertiginoso movimiento, en el palco de la señorita Gostrey, con percepción directa, con apercepción sorprendente, y que había estado vinculada, desde el comienzo, con cada una de las palpitaciones de su conciencia. Cuya finalidad expresa era algo que, en una cantidad del todo *nueva* que afrontar, no se podía saber, sencillamente. Dicha nueva cantidad estaba representada por el hecho de que Chad hubiera sufrido el proceso de una reelaboración. Esto era todo: fuera lo que fuese, era cuanto había. Strether nunca había visto las cosas hechas de aquel modo; tal vez fuera una especialidad de París. Si se ha estado presente en el proceso, poco a poco se puede domeñar el resultado; pero, tal y como estaban las cosas, se encontraba cara a cara con un asunto ya concluido. Se había percatado manifiestamente de que podían recibirle como a un perro en un juego de bolos; aunque esto se daba sobre la base de la cantidad antigua. Al principio había pensado en las lineas y los tonos como en cosas que asumir, pero a la sazón dichas posibilidades se habían fundido del todo. No había forma de calcular lo que el joven que tenía delante pensaría, sentiría o diría sobre el tema que fuese. Este conocimiento había de reconstruirlo Strether más tarde, a fin de dar cuenta de su nerviosismo, del mejor modo que supo, al igual que había de reconstruir, asimismo, la prontitud con que Chad había corregido su desconcierto. Se había necesitado un tiempo extraordinariamente breve para dicha corrección y, en el momento de estatuirse ésta, todo lo negativo hubo de desaparecer del porte de su compañero.

—Su compromiso con mi madre se ha convertido pues en lo que aquí llaman un *fait accompli* -el detalle decisivo no había consistido en nada más que esto.

Bueno, era suficiente, había pensado Strether mientras se dilataba en la réplica. Sin embargo, había pensado al mismo tiempo que nada le convenía menos que demorar excesivamente la respuesta.

—Sí —dijo radiante—, tomé cartas en el asunto precisamente por el feliz arreglo de la cuestión. Puedes ver, en consecuencia, en qué sentido pertenezco a tu familia. Es más —añadió—, barruntaba que tú lo sospechabas ya.

—Oh, lo he sospechado durante mucho tiempo; y lo que usted me dice me ayuda a entender que usted quisiera hacer algo. Hacer algo en el sentido —dijo Chad— de conmemorar un suceso tan... ¿cómo decirlo?, tan favorable. Me explico que usted entienda, y no sin lógica natural —prosiguió—, que mi devolución triunfal a casa como una especie de regalo de bodas para mi madre lo conmemoraría mejor que ninguna otra cosa. En realidad quiere encender usted una hoguera —dijo riendo— y arrojarme a ella. ¡Gracias, muchas gracias! —añadió con otra carcajada.

Afrontaba aquello con suma liberalidad y esto hizo que Strether viese en aquel momento que, en el fondo y a despecho del ribete de reserva que en realidad nada le costaba, había afrontado todo con liberalidad desde el principio. El ribete de reserva no era sino buen gusto. Las personas de modales formados podían tener al parecer, como una de sus mejores cartas, un ribete de reserva asimismo. Se había echado un tanto adelante para hablar; tenía los codos sobre la mesa; y el inescrutable y nuevo rostro que había adquirido en alguna parte y sin saber muy bien cómo se dejaba llevar por el movimiento próximo al de su compañero. Había cierta fascinación para el susodicho compañero por el hecho de no ser, aquella madura fisonomía, el rostro que, tras una atenta observación, había salido de Woollett. Strether experimentó cierta libertad de su parte al definirlo como el de un hombre de mundo: expediente que, a decir verdad, pareció acudir en cierto modo en su ayuda en aquel momento; el de un hombre que había atravesado experiencias que conocía en variada gama. Mediante vislumbres y miradas fortuitas es posible que el pasado acechase desde él; pero estas iluminaciones eran débiles y se apagaban al instante. Chad era moreno, robusto y fuerte; además, de antiguo, Chad había sido brusco. ¿Era por consiguiente la única diferencia su actual refinamiento? Posiblemente; pues que *había* refinamiento se notaba tanto como se habría notado en el sabor de una salsa o en el roce de una mano. El efecto era global: había retocado sus facciones, redibujándolas con una linea más limpia. Había despejado sus ojos, afirmado el color y abrillantado la elegante dentadura: el supremo ornato de su rostro; y al mismo tiempo que le había dotado de una forma y una superficie, como si dijéramos, un diseño, le había modulado la voz, fijado el acento y estimulado la sonrisa a un mayor protagonismo y los restantes movimientos a una mejor participación. Anteriormente, con no poca acción, había expresado muy poco; ahora expresaba lo que hiciera falta con casi nada. Era como si, en pocas palabras, se le hubiera, en realidad, en abundancia tal vez, pero sin forma definida, introducido en un férreo molde y sacado con feliz resultado. El fenómeno —Strether seguía teniéndolo por un fenómeno, un caso notable— era lo bastante manifiesto para palparse con la mano. Alargó la mano por fin y la puso en el brazo de Chad:

—Si me prometieras, en este mismo lugar y bajo palabra de honor, que vas a romper definitivamente, harías que el futuro estuviese lleno de bendiciones para todos. Liberarías la tensión de esta honrada, aunque en modo alguno alarmante, suspensión de ánimo en que durante tantos días me he mantenido aguardándote y me permitirías entregarme al reposo. Te daré mi bendición y me iré a la cama en paz.

Chad volvió a echarse hacia atrás ante aquello y, con las manos en los bolsillos, se removió ligeramente en la silla; postura en la que parecía, no obstante sonreír con nerviosismo, de lo más educado. Creyó entender Strether entonces que estaba realmente nervioso y enfocó esto como lo que habría calificado de síntoma saludable. La única señal al respecto hasta el momento había sido su repetido quitarse y ponerse el sombrero de ala ancha. Había hecho ademán en aquel instante de quitárselo otra vez, pero se había limitado a echarlo hacia atrás, de modo que quedó cabalgando informalmente sobre el cabello fuerte, juvenil, grisáceo y cortado a lo garçon. Se trató de un detalle que marcaba la pauta de lo familiar —lo privado y lo tardío— de su tranquila charla; y fue, a decir verdad, gracias a un hecho trivial de este tenor por lo que Strether tomó conciencia de otra cosa en aquel preciso momento. La observación estuvo determinada, por lo que a él respectaba, por una iluminación demasiado delicada para distinguirla de las demás, pero se trató, a pesar de ello, de una determinación taxativa. Le pareció que Chad, sin que cupiera la menor duda, era, en aquellos momentos... bueno, según el mismo Strether se dijo, lo único que tenía sentido para él. Nuestro amigo sufrió la súbita percepción de lo que, en determinados aspectos, era esto. Se le presentó, en pocas palabras, en un pronto, como el joven señalado por las mujeres; y durante un concentrado minuto, la dignidad, la comparativa austeridad, según se la imaginaba en broma, del personaje en cuestión, le afectó casi con temor respetuoso. Había una experiencia en su interlocutor que le observaba por debajo del ladeado sombrero y que además le observaba en virtud de una fuerza propia, por el hecho profundo de su cantidad y su calidad y no por gentileza de su presunta fanfarronería y pavoneo. Se trataba pues de la forma de ser de los hombres señalados por las mujeres, y también de los hombres por los que las mujeres eran, sin lugar a dudas y a su vez, distinguidas con suficiencia. Aquello afectó a Strether durante treinta segundos como una verdad importante; una verdad que, sin embargo, al minuto siguiente había caído ya en su hilo discursivo.

—¿No le parece que puede haber determinadas preguntas —inquirió Chad— que a un individuo, por muy impresionado que esté por su encantadora forma de plantear las cosas, le gustaría formular primero?

—Oh, sí, naturalmente. Estoy aquí para responder a lo que sea. Creo que puedo incluso decirte cosas, de sumo interés para ti, respecto de las que no sabes lo suficiente para preguntarme por ellas. Nos tomaremos tantos días como tú quieras. Pero ahora —concluyó Strether— me gustaría irme a la cama.

—¿En serio?

Chad había hablado con tanta sorpresa que estaba francamente divertido.

—¿No te lo crees... con lo que me has hecho pasar? El joven pareció meditar.

—Oh, yo no le he hecho pasar mucho... todavía.

—¿Quieres decir que habrán de suceder más? —Strether se echó a reír—. Razón de más, pues, para que yo afile las uñas.

Y, como para dar a entender aquello con lo que intuía podía contar en aquel momento, se puso de pie. Sabía que de aquel modo manifestaba que estaba contento de poner fin a su esfuerzo.

Chad, todavía sentado, lo contuvo, poniéndole una mano delante, cuando el otro pasó entre la mesa de ambos y la contigua.

—¡Oh, continuemos!

El tono fue, bien mirado, cuanto había deseado Strether; y totalmente propicia la expresión facial con que el que había dicho aquello le había mirado y retenido amablemente. El único defecto de aquellas cosas era quizá que ya no demostraban tanto ser fruto de la experiencia. Sí, pues experiencia era lo que Chad desplegaba ante él, ya que no grosería ni desafío. Por supuesto, la experiencia era, en cierto modo, desafío; pero no era, de ninguna de las maneras —más bien, a decir verdad, totalmente lo contrario—, grosería: tanto más que se había ganado. Envejecía a ojos vista, pensó Strether, mientras razonaba de esta suerte. Y entonces, con maduro palmoteo en el brazo del visitante, acabó por levantarse también; con lo que puede decirse que se habían dado ya hechos suficientes, en aquel momento, para que el visitante creyera que se había llegado *a un* acuerdo. ¿No se había llegado por lo menos al testimonio de la buena fe de Chad respecto de una solución? Strether se sorprendió enfocando la manifestación de Chad relativa a que continuasen como base suficiente para irse a dormir. Sin embargo, luego de los hechos referidos, no se había ido a dormir directamente; pues, una vez que se hubieron adentrado juntos en la noche suave y brillante, vino a surgir un contratiempo prácticamente de ningún otro sitio que una breve circunstancia, que habría podido actuar sólo en calidad de quietud confirmadora. Había gente, rumores expresivos, luz proyectada, todavía en la calle, y luego que hubieron deambulado un momento, entre aquellas cosas, por la gran calle de diáfana arquitectura, torcieron, con tácito acuerdo, al barrio en donde estaba el hotel de Strether.

—Naturalmente —dijo allí Chad, abrupto—, naturalmente, que mi madre elucubre con usted a propósito de mí es algo normal: claro que no les faltó sitio donde hincar el diente. Tuvieron que ponerse muy gordos.

Se había detenido y dejado que el amigo se plantease la posibilidad de alguna puntualización; fue esto lo que facultó a Strether a hacer una mientras tanto:

—Oh, nunca tuvimos interés en entrar en detalle. No estábamos de ningún modo obligados a tanto. Bastó con «engordar» para echarte de menos como lo hicimos.

Pero Chad, dato extraño, insistió, aunque, bajo la elevada farola de la esquina, donde se habían detenido, había parecido al principio como afectado por la alusión de Strether al amplio sentimiento, en casa, respecto de su ausencia.

—Lo que quiero decir es que tienen que habérselo imaginado.

—¿El qué?

—Bueno... horrores.

Aquello chocó a Strether: los horrores eran tan escasos, tan superficiales, al cabo, en aquella imagen férrea y lógica. Pero él se encontraba allí para rendir absoluto tributo a la verdad.

—Sí, puedo decir que imaginamos horrores. Pero ¿dónde está nuestro perjuicio, ya que no nos equivocábamos?

Chad alzó el rostro hacia la luz y fue aquel uno de los momentos en que, a su extraordinaria manera, pareció más dotado que nunca de aquel aire de exhibirse adrede. Fue como si en aquellos instantes acabara de presentarse, tan cabal su identidad, su palpable presencia y su maciza y joven virilidad, tan propio de un eslabón que pertenece a una cadena que prácticamente podía alcanzar el rango de demostración. Fue como si —¿y de qué modo, sino anómalamente?— no pudiera, a fin de cuentas, por menos de pensar lo bastante bien de estas cosas para cederlas por lo que valían. ¿Y qué podía tener ello para Strether sino la sugestión de un autorrespeto, cierto sentido de fuerza raramente pervertido, algo latente y más allá de todo alcance, lleno de presagios y tal vez envidiable? La indirecta, acto seguido, había adoptado un nombre en un pronto: un nombre al que se aferró nuestro amigo mientras se preguntaba si no estaría tratando realmente con un irreductible y joven pagano. Tamaña descripción-y no dejó de sobresaltarse por ella— poseía un sonido que gratificaba el oído interior, de modo que al segundo siguiente ya lo había dado por bueno. Pagano: sí, esto era, ¿acaso se equivocaba?, lo que Chad *tenía* lógicamente que ser. Lo que sin duda era. Lo que en realidad era. La idea era un indicio y, lejos de oscurecer las perspectivas, arrojó cierta claridad. Strether desentrañó en esta rápida iluminación que un pagano era tal vez, en el trance en que había acabado por sumirse, lo que más se deseaba en Woollett. Allí sabrían entendérselas con uno, con uno bueno; encontraría una circunstancia favorable, naturalmente; y la imaginación de Strether fantaseó por anticipado y presenció la primera aparición del eminente personaje. No tuvo más que el ligero malestar consistente, mientras el joven se apartaba de la luz, en intuir que, en aquel momentáneo silencio, le habían medio adivinado el pensamiento.

—Bien, no me cabe la menor duda —dijo Chad— de que se acercaron bastante. Como usted dice, los detalles no importan. Por lo general se ha tratado de casos en que yo mismo me he dejado llevar. Pero me estoy recuperando: ya no soy tan malo. —Con lo que reanudaron el camino del hotel de Strether.

—¿Quieres decir —preguntó el segundo mientras se acercaban a la entrada— que en este momento no estás con ninguna mujer?

—Pero, caramba, ¿qué tendrá que ver eso?

—Bueno, ¿sabes?, es el meollo del asunto.

—¿De mi vuelta a casa? —Chad estaba manifiestamente sorprendido—. ¡Oh, es demasiado! ¿Piensa acaso que cada vez que quiero irme cualquiera tiene el poder...?

—¿... de evitar —continuó Strether por él— que lleves a cabo tus deseos? Bueno, ya nos figuramos desde el principio que alguien, o quizá un ameno grupo, te alejaba con toda destreza de tales deseos. Que es lo que, si estás en manos de alguien, puede volver a ocurrir. No hace falta que respondas —insistió—, pero si no estás en manos de nadie, mucho mejor. Porque en tal caso nada importa salvo lo que toca a tu partida.

Chad trabucó el hilo discursivo:

—¿Que no hace falta que responda? —dijo sin ningún resentimiento—. Bueno, ese tipo de preguntas tienen siempre un lado más bien exagerado. No se sabe muy bien lo que quiere decir usted con estar en «manos» de las mujeres. Es todo tan impreciso. Se está cuando no se está. No se está cuando se está. Y en tal caso no se puede despedir a la gente por las buenas. —Parecía explicarse con toda amabilidad—. *Nunca* me han atrapado... con toda fuerza; y en cuanto a cualquier otra cosa verdaderamente mejor, no creo que haya temido en ningún momento una situación así. —Algo había en aquello que contenía las preguntas de Strether y tamaña circunstancia le daba ocasión de proseguir. Salió entonces con lo que podía ser un pensamiento más útil—. ¿Sabe usted cuánto me gusta París?

Cuyo resultado fue que nuestro amigo se maravillase.

—¡Oh, si es ése el único asunto con usted...! —Era *él* quien casi manifestaba resentimiento.

La sonrisa de Chad, sin embargo, hizo algo más que salirle al encuentro.

—¿Y no es suficiente?

Strether vaciló, pero las palabras acabaron por brotar.

—No para tu madre.

Dicho, sin embargo, sonaba un tanto extraño, efecto de lo cual fue que Chad rompiera a reír. Strether sucumbió ante aquello, aunque con extrema brevedad.

—Permítenos mantener todavía nuestra hipótesis. Aunque si eres tan libre y tan fuerte, entonces no tienes excusa. Escribiré mañana por la mañana —añadió con decisión—; diré que te he convencido.

Aquello pareció despertar en Chad un nuevo interés.

—¿Con qué frecuencia escribe usted?

—Oh, continuamente.

—¿Y se explaya mucho?

Strether se había puesto un poco impaciente.

—Espero que no me encuentren demasiado prolijo.

—Oh, estoy seguro de que no. ¿Y recibe usted noticias tan a menudo?

Strether volvió a detenerse.

—Tan a menudo como merezco.

—Mi madre escribe —dijo Chad— unas cartas muy cariñosas.

Strether, delante de la cerrada *porte-cochère,* miró fijamente al joven durante un momento.

—¡Es más, muchacho, de cuanto haces *tú!* Pero nuestras suposiciones carecen de importancia —añadió —, si es que realmente no estás atrapado.

El orgullo de Chad, sin embargo, pareció levemente afectado.

—No lo he estado nunca: permítame insistir al respecto. Siempre he hecho mi voluntad. —Con lo que añadió—: Y la sigo haciendo en este momento.

—Entonces ¿por qué estás aquí? ¿Qué te retiene —preguntó Strether— si has sabido mantenerte libre?

Aquello hizo que Chad, tras un cruce de miradas, se echase hacia atrás.

—¿Piensa acaso que sólo pueden retenerle a uno las mujeres? —Su sorpresa y su hincapié verbal vibraron de manera tan nítida en la calle silenciosa que Strether parpadeó hasta que recordó la seguridad de la prosodia inglesa—. ¿Es eso —inquirió el joven— lo que se cree en Woollett? —Ante la buena fe de la pregunta, Strether había mudado de color, con la impresión de que, como él mismo habría dicho, había metido la pata. Al parecer, estúpidamente, se había representado en términos equivocados lo que se pensaba en Woollett; pero antes de tener tiempo para rectificar ya estaba Chad sobre él—. ¡En tal caso debo decirle que manifiestan ustedes un espíritu vil!

Vino a juntarse aquello, por desdicha para Strether, con el reflejo de sí propio espoleado en su interior por el aire agradable del Boulevard Malesherbes, de tal suerte que su ímpetu desconcertante fue desacostumbradamente grande. Era una indirecta que, de haberla enderezado él —y haberla enderezado incluso a la pobre señora Newsome—, no habría pasado de ser saludable; pero enderezada por Chad —y con absoluta lógica— poco faltaba para cortar el resuello. Ellos *no* tenían un espíritu vil ni nada que se le pareciese; sin embargo, incontestablemente, habían levantado castillos, y no sin cierta complacencia, sobre un cimiento que podía volverse sobre ellos. En cualquier caso, Chad había puesto a punto a su visitante; incluso había puesto a punto a su admirable madre; había, de manera absoluta, mediante un giro de muñeca y un tirón de su generoso lazo, puesto a punto, en un montón, al Woollett dormido en sus laureles. No había duda de que Woollett *había* insistido en la ordinariez del joven; y aquello por lo que en aquel momento estaba allí, en la calle dormida, estaba, a juzgar por su forma de pulsar la siguiente cuerda, a punto de hacer de tal insistencia una preocupación comprometedora para los empecinados. Era ni más ni menos como si le hubieran imputado una vulgaridad cuya desaparición hubiera de provocar con un simple gesto. Y lo inefable del caso era que a Strether le parecía que, en la misma jugada, aquello caía sobre su propia cabeza. Se había preguntado un minuto antes si el muchacho era un pagano y a la sazón se sorprendía preguntándose si por casualidad no sería un caballero. No se le ocurrió, por lo menos en el acto, por suerte para él, que una persona no podía ser al mismo tiempo ambas cosas. En aquel momento nada había en el ambiente que pusiera en peligro la combinación; y lo había todo, por el contrario, para proporcionar su poco de brillantez. Se le ocurrió, por añadidura, que no hacía sino salir al encuentro de las más arduas cuestiones; aunque acaso, a decir verdad, únicamente para sustituir a otra. ¿No sería precisamente por haber aprendido a ser un caballero por lo que había domeñado la consiguiente artimaña de parecerlo tan a la perfección que apenas si se le podía hablar directamente? Aunque, ¿cuál era la pista de causa tan fértil? Había demasiados indicios, pues, de que Strether carecía aún, y entre ellos se encontraban los indicios de los indicios. Lo que en consecuencia importaba para él era que tenía que encarar de lleno una nueva asunción de ignorancias. Había acabado por acostumbrarse, en aquella época, a claves memorísticas, especialmente procedentes de sus propios labios, de lo que no conocía; pero las había

mantenido porque, en primer lugar, eran privadas, y porque, en segundo, prácticamente conllevaban un tributo. No sabía lo que estaba mal y —mientras los demás no supieran lo poco que él sabía— se alzaría con su condición. Pero si no sabía, en particular tan relevante, lo que estaba bien, Chad por lo menos era consciente ya de que no lo sabía; y esto, por determinados motivos, afectaba a nuestro amigo como hecho curiosamente público. Fue, a decir verdad, una situación desenmascaradora que el joven le hubiera dejado lo bastante a sus anchas para experimentar su escalofrío: hasta que comprendió su idoneidad, en una palabra, para justificarle generosamente otra vez. En realidad esto último era lo que Chad había hecho con dadivosidad total. Pero fue con un sencillo pensamiento con lo que enfocó la totalidad del caso. «¡Oh, me siento estupendamente!» Esto había sido lo que, con notorio aturdimiento, le había hecho desear la cama.

II

Pareció realmente cierto, además, a juzgar por la conducta que Chad llevó después de aquello. Rebosaba de atenciones para con el embajador de su madre; a despecho de lo cual, y es sobremanera notable, los restantes contactos del segundo acabaron por hacer valer sus derechos. Las veladas de Strether, pluma en mano, con la señora Newsome, sostenidas en los aposentos del hombre, se interrumpieron, a la vez que experimentaron un enriquecimiento; y se vieron más entreveradas que nunca de horas en que daba cuenta cabal de sí, de manera diferente, pero casi con la misma educación y dedicación, a María Gostrey. Ahora que, como él mismo habría dicho, tenía algo de que hablar, se encontraba, respecto de cualquier extrañeza que pudiera albergarse para él en la doble relación, a la vez más alerta y más indiferente. Había sido delicado ante la señora Newsome a propósito de su útil amigo, pero había empezado a rondarle la imaginàción que Chad, al recoger para beneficio materno una pluma no utilizada de antiguo, acaso fuera más delicado. Esto haría, en definitiva, según creía entender, que nada redundase en beneficio suyo en manos de Chad, salvo lo que específicamente *hubiera* de caerle en suerte; la mayor divergencia de lo cual consistiría ni más ni menos que en el elemento fundamental de cualquier lubricación, mediante ligerezas, de la relación que mantenían. Había que prevenir en consecuencia una circunstancia de tal índole que él, con toda franqueza, pudiese desplegar ante el joven los diversos acontecimientos, tal y como se habían dado, de su graciosa alianza. Hablaba él de estos hechos, con toda amabilidad y atención, como de «toda la historia», y antojábasele que podía calificar la alianza de graciosa siempre que él mantuviese la suficiente gravedad al respecto. Se felicitaba incluso por exagerar la libertad sin ambages de su primer encuentro con la maravillosa dama; era puntillosamente categórico en cuanto a las absurdas condiciones en que habían trabado conocimiento —el casi casi haberse recogido el uno al otro en la calle— y concebía —¡la suprema inspiración!— el traslado de la guerra al país enemigo mediante la manifestación de sorpresa ante la ignorancia del enemigo.

Siempre le había parecido que esto último era el gran estilo de las contiendas, tanto mayor, por consiguiente, su motivación, en la medida en que no podía recordar que hubiese peleado nunca al gran estilo. Todos, según esto, conocían a la señorita Gostrey: ¿cómo es que Chad no la conocía? La dificultad, la imposibilidad era, en realidad, huir de ello; Strether aceptó, por lo que dio por hecho, la carga de la prueba del contrario. Esta tonalidad era feliz en la medida que Chad parecía reconocerla en absoluto como a persona cuya fama le ha alcanzado, pero contra cuyo conocimiento se habían desatado no pocas condiciones adversas. Señalaba él, al mismo tiempo, que sus relaciones sociales, tal y como se habían planteado, tal vez no tenían el alcance supuesto por Strether con la efervescencia de sus compatriotas. Insinuaba su posesión de una modalidad cada vez más establecida en cuanto a un principio selectivo heterodoxo; de modo que la moraleja parecía ser que había medrado poco en la «colonia». Por el momento, estaba claro, tenía un interés muy otro. Profundo, según entrevió; y Strether, por lo que a él respectaba, no podía sino observarlo. No podía ver hasta dónde llegaba la profundidad. ¡Ojalá no conociera el limite demasiado pronto! Pues había abundante porción del asunto compartido con que Chad ya había comenzado a aficionarse. Le gustaba a éste, para empezar, su proyectado padre adoptivo; que era, claramente, lo que no se había contenido en las postales. Que le detestase era la adversidad para la que mejor se había preparado Strether; no había esperado que la verdadera forma de ser del muchacho hubiera de darle más trabajo queda supuesta. Y lo hacía sugiriendo que debía camuflarse de algún modo para no andar convencido de que era suficientemente desagradable. Esto lo había tenido presente como si fuera la única forma de andar convencido de que era suficientemente minucioso. La cuestión era que si bien la tolerancia de Chad respecto de su minuciosidad era insincera y no era sino el mejor de los artilugios para ganar tiempo, lo enfocaba todo, sin embargo, como tácitamente concertado.

Tal pareció, al cabo de diez días, el fruto de la abundante y frecuente conversación mediante la que Strether vertía en él todo cuanto le importaba saber, poniéndolo en posesión cabal de hechos y cifras. Sin

interrumpir dichos coloquios durante más de un minuto, Chad se comportaba, adoptaba una actitud y hablaba como si fuera más bien grave, incluso un poco melancólico, aunque fundamental y holgadamente libre. No hizo ninguna clara profesión de urgencia productora, pero hizo las preguntas más inteligentes, se manifestó, por momentos, incluso más profundo que la fuente de información de su amigo, justificó gracias a dichos detalles la nativa estimación de su latente meollo y tuvo en todos los aspectos el aire de quien hace por vivir, reflexivamente, en el interior de la imagen formal y lúcida. Se paseaba arriba y abajo a la vista de la producción, tomaba a Strether por el brazo amablemente en los puntos en que éste se detenía, revisaba las cosas repetidamente desde uno y otro ángulo, inclinaba una cabeza crítica ante cada dirección y, mientras fumaba un todavía más crítico cigarrillo, censuraba a su compañero a propósito de este o aquel paso. Strether buscaba consuelo —momentos había en que lo necesitaba— repitiéndose a sí mismo; a decir verdad era incuestionable que Chad tenía un sistema. La cuestión principal, sin embargo, era adónde conducía dicho sistema. No facilitó esto las cuestiones secundarias; pero ello careció de importancia cuando se hubieron satisfecho todas las preguntas salvo las propias. Que era un hombre libre constituía respuesta suficiente y no era del todo ridículo que esta libertad debiera probarse a sí misma lo que era difícil mover. Su transformada condición, su amable casa, sus hermosos objetos, su fácil charla, su misma voracidad respecto de Strether, insaciable y, cuando todo se hubo dicho, propicia... ¿qué eran estas notables particularidades sino elementos de su libertad? Tenía la cualidad de hacer de ellas un regalo, en tan bellas formas, para su visitante; lo que constituía principalmente el motivo de que dicho visitante estuviera en su interín, por entonces, un poco desconcertado. Strether se sentía en este período cada vez más tentado por la comprobada necesidad de remodelar de algún modo su plan. Se sorprendía, francamente, lanzando tristones vistazos, tímidas miradas de acecho a la influencia personificada, la decidida adversaria que le había fallado en virtud de un toque propio y basado en la cariñosa hipótesis de cuya palpable presencia había, con la inspiración de la señora Newsome, actuado en términos absolutos. En secreto, durante un par de veces, había manifestado literalmente el irritado deseo de que *ella* acudiera y se la encontrase.

En modo alguno podía forzar, sin embargo, respecto de Woollett, que un itinerario de aquella suerte, una vida joven y tan corrompida, manifestara a la postre un aspecto admisible e hiciese gala ante la ciudadanía, por ejemplo, de algo parecido a la impunidad del hombre de mundo; pero sí podía, por lo menos, instarse a sí mismo a afirmar que prepararía al joven para el eco más peligroso. Este eco-tan audible allá, en el aire seco y enrarecido, como el estridente titular de una gacetillapareció llegar a él mientras escribía. «Dice que no hay ninguna mujer», podía oír el informe de la señora Newsome, en mayúsculas del tamaño de un periódico, a la señora Pocock; y alcanzó a oír de la señora Pocock la respuesta del lector del diario. Podía ver en la cara de la dama más joven la seriedad de su atención y captar el pleno escepticismo de su apenas demorado «¿Qué es lo que *hay,* entonces?», mecanismo por el que captó con mínimo margen de error la clara y decisiva respuesta de la madre: «Mucha disposición es lo que hay, sin lugar a dudas, a *fingir* que no hay nada». Strether, una vez que hubo echado la carta, había imaginado toda aquella escena; y se trató de una escena en que, en su trajín, según acontecía, no tenía menos fija la mirada en la hija. Percibía intuitivamente la convicción que la señora Pocock aprovecharía la ocasión para reafirmar: convicción basada, según había adivinado él desde el principio que se basaría, en la esencial ineptitud del señor Strether. Ella le había escrutado con profunda mirada incluso antes de que el hombre embarcara y no creía que *él* encontrase a la mujer grabada en la escrutadora mirada femenina. ¿Acaso no tenía ella, en el mejor de los casos, sino una pequeñísima fe en la capacidad masculina para encontrar mujeres? No iba a ser ni siquiera como cuando él había encontrado a la madre de la mujer, tanto más, según su arrojada intuición, cuanto que era su madre quien había arreglado el encuentro. Había sido su madre quien había encontrado al hombre y, en cierto modo, la opinión particular de la señora Pocock al respecto seguía educando el sentido crítico de esta misma mujer. El hombre debía su segura situación en general al hecho de que los descubrimientos de la señora Newsome se aceptaban en Woollett; pero el hombre sabía en su interín, y nos referimos a nuestro amigo, que la señora Pocock se sentiría movida a la sazón y de manera irresistible a manifestar lo que pensaba de él. Que le dieran carta blanca a ella, sería la moraleja, que pronto encontraría a la mujer.

La impresión que tuvo de la señorita Gostrey después de haberla presentado a Chad fue la de una persona casi anormalmente en guardia. Se le ocurrió que al principio había sido incapaz de sacar de ella lo que quería; aunque, a decir verdad, *de lo* que él quería en aquella especial coyuntura no habría podido hacer, sin duda, sino una desnuda afirmación. El dato se le escurrió y en nada contribuyó a plantear a la mujer, *tout bêtement,* según ella misma decía a menudo: «¿Verdad que le resulta simpático?», gracias a que estimaba que acumular evidencias en favor del joven era en realidad la menor de sus necesidades. Y llamaba repetidas veces a la puerta femenina para hacerle saber que el caso de Chad —por escaso que fuera el interés que despertase— era, en principio y primer lugar, un milagro casi monstruoso. Se trataba de la transformación total de un hombre y un caso tan notable que nada más, para el observador inteligente,

podía significar.

—Es una intriga —afirmó el hombre—, hay más de cuanto alcanza a ver la mirada. —Y dio rienda suelta a su fantasía—. ¡Aquí hay gato encerrado!

Aquella muestra de su fantasía pareció complacer a la dama.

—¿Y quién es el responsable?

—Bueno, el factor responsable es, me parece, el destino que aguarda al individuo, el oscuro hado que acecha. Lo que quiero decir es que no se puede contar con tales elementos. Yo no tengo sino mis particulares, mis modestos medios humanos. Dar paso a lo anormal es desobedecer las reglas del juego. Toda la energía individual ha de concentrarse para arrostrarlo, para seguirle la pista. Diablos, lo que se quiere, ¿no cree? —confesó con cara extraña—, lo que uno quiere es gozar de una cosa tan singular. Llámelo vida, si quiere —descifró—, diga que es la pobre, querida y vieja vida que, con toda sencillez, nos aturde con sus sorpresas. Nada cambia el hecho de que la sorpresa paralice o, en cualquier caso, absorba... prácticamente todo, maldita sea, lo que uno ve, lo que uno *puede* ver.

Los silencios de la mujer nunca eran torpes.

—¿Es eso lo que ha escrito usted a casa?

El hombre respondió sin dilación:

—¡Oh, sí, querida!

La mujer hizo otra pausa mientras el hombre repetía su breve paseo por las alfombras.

—Si no tiene cuidado se le echarán encima.

—Oh, pero también he dicho que volverá.

—¿Y *va* a volver? —preguntó la señorita Gostrey.

El tono particular con que dijo aquello hizo que el hombre, enderezándose, la mirase largamente.

—¿Qué es eso sino la pregunta en que he gastado tesoros de paciencia e ingenio en hacerle *a usted,* en vista de que él... después que todo ha aminorado la facilidad de respuesta? ¿Qué es eso sino lo que he venido hoy a obtener de usted? ¿Quiere irse nuestro hombre?

—No, no quiere —dijo ella al cabo—. No es hombre libre.

El talante de la respuesta le afectó.

—Entonces ¿lo ha sabido usted desde el principio?

—Yo no he sabido sino lo que he visto; y me asombra —aseguró la mujer con cierta impaciencia— que usted no haya visto tanto. Bastó estar allí con él...

—¿En el palco? ¿Qué más? —urgió el hombre sin comprender del todo.

—Bueno... para estar segura.

—¿Segura de qué?

Al oír aquello se levantó la mujer de la silla, más proclive de lo que nunca había manifestado a derrumbarse ante la poquedad masculina. Incluso, tras una sincera y breve pausa, se dirigió al hombre con un retazo de piedad.

—¡Adivínelo!

Fue una mancha, a decir verdad, lo que esbozó el rubor del rostro del hombre; de modo que, durante unos momentos, lo que les diferenciaba se interpuso entre ellos.

—¿Quiere usted decir que la sola hora que pasó con él le informó tantas cosas de su vida? Muy bien; por lo que a mí respecta, no estoy tan loco que no pueda comprenderla a usted ni comprenderle a *él* en cierta medida. Que ha hecho lo que más le apetecía no es, entre nosotros, asunto merecedor de la menor disputa. Tampoco merece mayor atención a estas alturas qué es lo que más le apetece. Pero yo no hablo —explicó con toda lógica— de ningún torpe animal que él pueda seguir frecuentando. Hablo de una persona que, en la situación actual, pueda haber influido, pueda haber tenido un peso real.

—¡Eso es exactamente lo que yo hablo! —dijo la señorita Gostrey. Pero al instante expuso sus concreciones—: Yo creía que usted pensaba, o que se pensaba en Woollett, que era eso lo que los torpes animales hacían necesariamente. ¡Los torpes animales no lo hacen necesariamente! —afirmó con energía—. Detrás de todas las apariencias que indiquen lo contrario tiene que haber alguien, alguien que no sea un animal, puesto que aceptamos el milagro. ¿Quién, si no una persona así, puede explicar un milagro de esta suerte?

El hombre aceptó aquello.

—Porque el hecho en sí es la mujer.

—Una mujer. Una mujer cualquiera. Esta es una de las cosas que tienen que haber necesariamente.

—Pero usted dio a entender que era como mínimo una buena mujer.

—¿Una buena mujer? —la mujer agitó los brazos cuando soltó la carcajada—. ¡Yo diría que excelente!

—Entonces, ¿por qué la niega él?

La señorita Gostrey recapacitó durante un momento.

—Porque es demasiado buena para entrar en esto. ¿No ha visto usted —prosiguió— hasta qué punto cuenta para él?

Strether iba comprendiendo la situación paulatinamente; sin embargo, las últimas palabras le hicieron comprender además otras cosas.

—Pero ¿no queremos que sea él quien influya en *ella?*

—Bueno, se da el caso. Lo que tiene usted ante los ojos es su conducta. Debe usted perdonarle si no habla demasiado claro. En París son tácitos estos menesteres.

Strether alcanzaba a imaginárselo; pero ¡ojo!

—¿Aunque la mujer sea buena?

La mujer volvió a soltar la carcajada.

—Sí y aunque el hombre también lo sea. Siempre hay cierta prudencia en tales casos —explicó la mujer con mayor seriedad— respecto de lo que merece ser visto. Y nada hay que merezca tanto ser visto como la espontánea e insólita bondad.

—Ah, usted habla, pues, ahora —dijo Strether— de personas no refinadas.

—Me encantan —replicó ella— sus clasificaciones. Pero ¿quiere usted que le dé —preguntó—, respecto de nuestro asunto, el más sabio consejo de que soy capaz? No la considere, no la juzgue en modo alguno por ella misma. Considérela y júzguela únicamente por *él.*

El hombre tuvo por lo menos el valor de la lógica de su compañera.

—¿Porque en tal caso me resultará simpática? —Daba la impresión, con aquella imaginación tan desatada, de que ya se había dado la mentada simpatía, aunque sin perder de vista, por otro lado, el pleno alcance de lo poco que aquello convendría a su talonario—. Pero ¿es esto lo que yo buscaba?

La mujer hubo de confesarle ciertamente que no. Pero había algo más.

—No lo piense demasiado. Hay multitud de cosas. Puede ser realmente extraordinario. No ha captado usted a nuestro hombre del todo.

Esto lo aceptó Strether por su lado; pero su agudeza, sin embargo, vino a mostrarle el peligro.

—Sí, pero ¿y si cuanto más comprendo mejor me parece él?

Bueno, ella tenía algo a mano.

—Es una posibilidad... pero que él la rechace no quiere decir, en cualquier caso, que sea por simple consideración. Hay una dificultad —dijo ella—. Es el esfuerzo por romper con ella.

Strether parpadeó ante la idea.

—¿«Romper»...?

—Bueno, quiero decir que hay cierta pugna y una parte de ésta es lo que él oculta. Tómese su tiempo: es la única forma de no cometer errores que lamentaría; entonces lo entenderá. Él quiere deshacerse de ella muy en serio.

Nuestro amigo estaba ya tan absorto por la imagen que aquello le había provocado que casi jadeaba.

—¿Después de todo lo que ella ha hecho por él?

La señorita Gostrey le dedicó una mirada que un segundo después se transformaba en una sonrisa maravillosa.

—¡No es tan bueno como usted piensa!

No le abandonaron, las palabras, digo, prometiéndole, dado su carácter de advertencia, considerable ayuda; pero el apoyo que esperaba sacar de las mismas se veía, durante cada nuevo contacto con Chad, neutralizado por otra cosa. ¿Qué podía ser esta fuerza desconcertante, se preguntaba, sino la sensación, constantemente reiterada, de que Chad *era* -insistía, de hecho, en ser— tan bueno como él pensaba? Sin saber por qué, parecía que él no podía *sino* ser tan bueno desde el momento en que no era tan malo. Hubo una serie de días, en cualquier caso, en que la relación con el joven —y su efecto inmediato, como si no pudiera surtir ningún otro— apartaba de la conciencia de Strether todo menos aquello. El pequeño Bilham llenó la escena una vez más, pero el pequeño Bilham se convirtió, incluso en medida mayor de lo que en principio había ocurrido, en una de las muchas formas de la relación total; una consecuencia acicateada, en el sentir de nuestro amigo, por un par de incidentes con los que aún hemos de tomar contacto. El mismo Waymarsh fue arrastrado al remolino para aquella ocasión; ésta lo absorbió por completo, aunque sólo temporalmente, y hubo días en que Strether parecía chocar con él como el nadador que se sumerge puede rozar un objeto submarino. El medio insondable les sostenía: los modales de Chad eran el medio insondable; y nuestro amigo se sentía como si se hubieran cruzado, en la profunda zambullida, con el ojo redondo e impersonal del silencioso pez. Ocurrió prácticamente entre ambos que Waymarsh le diera entonces su oportunidad; y el dejo de disgusto que Strether obtuvo de la concesión se le antojó no poco parecido a la turbación que había experimentado en la escuela, de niño, cuando la familia acudía a presenciar las exhibiciones. Podía actuar delante de extraños, pero los parientes eran mortales, y en aquel momento era como si, en comparación, Waymarsh fuera un pariente. Le parecía oírle decir: «¡Empieza, pues!» y saborear

una premonición de concienzuda crítica doméstica. El *había* empezado en la medida en que había podido; Chad sabía ya y profusamente lo que quería; ¿y qué violencia vulgar esperaba de él su compañero de peregrinaje cuando realmente había vaciado su espíritu? Y parecía que, entre unas cosas y otras, lo que el pobre Waymarsh quería decir era: «Ya te lo dije, te dije que perderías tu alma inmortal». Pero no era menos manifiesto que además Strether tenía sus propios problemas y que, puesto que debían ir al fondo de las cosas, no derrochaba más virtud en observar a Chad que Chad en observarle a él. ¿En qué punto era peor que el de Waymarsh su chapuzón en nombre del deber? Pues *él* no necesitaba detenerse para resistir y rechazar, no necesitaba parlamentar, en cualquier caso, con el enemigo.

Los paseos, en París, para ver lo que fuera o ir de visita a cualquier parte, eran, por consiguiente, inevitables y normales, y las últimas sesiones en el maravilloso *troisième,* el hogar encantador, cuando los hombres se apoltronaban y la imagen aumentaba su sugestión entre las brumas del tabaco, la música más o menos buena y la conversación más o menos políglota, no había que distinguirlas por principios de las de las mañanas y las tardes. Nada, hubo de reconocer Strether mientras se repantigaba y fumaba, podía parecerse menos a una escena de violencia que la más animada de tales ocasiones. Eran ocasiones de discusión, sin embargo, y Strether no había oído en su vida tantas opiniones ni tantos temas. En Woollett había opiniones, pero sólo a propósito de tres o cuatro asuntillos. Las diferencias había que armonizarlas allí; si bien eran indudablemente profundas, no obstante escasas, eran serenas: eran, como quien dice, casi tan tímidas como si la gente estuviera avergonzada de ellas. La gente mostraba poca desconfianza hacia tales cosas, por otro lado, en el Boulevard Malesherbes, y estaba tan lejos de sentir vergüenza por ellas-como, a decir verdad, por cualquier otra cosa— que a menudo parecía haberlas inventado para prevenir las convenciones que destruyen el gusto por la conversación. Nadie había hecho jamás una cosa semejante en Woollett, aunque Strether recordaba veces en que él mismo se había sentido tentado a ello sin saber del todo por qué. A la sazón comprendía por qué: no había querido sino estimular las relaciones.

No eran estos, empero, sino recuerdos entre paréntesis; y el giro que su aventura había dado en conjunto consistía, sin que cupiera la menor duda, en que si sus nervios trepidaban al máximo ello se debía a que echaba de menos la violencia. Cuando se preguntaba si nadie, en relación con esto, iba a saltar de una vez, casi habría podido creerse que se preguntaba sobre la manera de provocarla. Sería demasiado absurdo que una escena semejante se evocara en busca de alivio; ya se ha calificado suficientemente de absurdo que hubiera comenzado con conmociones y altos vuelos para obtener una sola comida aceptada. ¿Qué clase de desgraciado había esperado que fuera Chad, en cualquier caso? Strether tuvo ocasión de hacer esta pregunta, pero tuvo la precaución de formularla en privado. Podía, comparativamente reciente como era —no era sino un hecho de hacía pocos días—, mirar de frente su primitiva crudeza; pero, por lo que tocaba a la aproximación del observador, como si se tratase de una posesión ilícita, habría apartado el recuerdo de su cabeza. Había ecos de esto mismo, sin embargo, en las cartas de la señora Newsome, y también momentos en que tales ecos le hacían exclamar a propósito del deseo femenino de que tuviera tacto. Se ruborizaba, claro está, en el acto, más por la explicación que por el fondo del asunto: y se le ocurrió a tiempo de salvar sus modales que ella no habría sido, con mucho, tan delicada como él. El tacto de aquella mujer estaba en relación directa con el Océano Atlántico, la Administración General de Correos y la extravagante curvatura del globo.

Chad, cierto día, había invitado a un té, en el Boulevard Malesherbes, a unos cuantos escogidos, un grupo que de nuevo incluía a la diáfana señorita Barrace; y Strether, al salir, había dado un paseo con el conocido de quien, en sus cartas a la señora Newsome, hablaba como del pequeño artista. Había tenido multitud de ocasiones para mencionarlo como el compañero, valga la extrañeza, de la única estrecha relación personal que la observación había detectado en la existencia de Chad. El camino del pequeño Bilham de aquella tarde no era el de Strether, pero le había acompañado amablemente, pese a todo, y fue una porción de su amabilidad el que, mientras, lamentablemente, se ponía a llover, se encontraran de pronto sentados y charlando en un café en que se habían refugiado. La intensa hora que había pasado en compañía de Chad ni siquiera se había completado; había charlado con la señorita Barrace, que le había reprochado que no hubiera ido a verla, y, por encima de todo, se le había ocurrido una feliz idea para tranquilizar la tensión nerviosa de Waymarsh. Posiblemente se podía hacer algo por este último con la idea de la conquista de dicha dama, cuya rápida detección de lo que podía entretenerla había dado cierta libertad a Strether. ¿Qué había querido decir ella sino preguntar si podía ayudar al hombre en lo tocante a su magnífico gravamen y si no podía, en cualquier caso, mantener en suspenso su santa ira, para crear así en el espíritu del amigo, incluso en un mundo de irrelevancia, la posibilidad de una relación? ¿De qué se trataba, sino de una relación que había que juzgar por lo decorativo y, en particular, dada su firmeza, que había que pasear entre volantes y flores, en un cupé forrado, por lo que Strether alcanzaba a descifrar, de brocado azul marino? A él nunca lo habían paseado, nunca, por lo menos, en un cupé y tras un lacayo. Había ido con la señorita Gostrey en cabriolé, unas cuantas veces con la señora Pocock en una calesa

abierta, con la señora Newsome en un coche de cuatro asientos y, de vez en cuando, en las montañas, en un tosco carruaje; pero la verdadera aventura de su amigo trascendía su experiencia personal. Enseñaba a la sazón a su compañero con prontitud suficiente, la verdad sea dicha, lo incómoda, en calidad de monitor general, que esta curiosa cantidad última podía sentirse una vez más.

—¿A qué juego está jugando? —Un instante después señalaba que no había aludido al caballero gordo sumergido en el dominó, en el que había comenzado por posar la mirada, sino al común anfitrión de la hora anterior, respecto del que, en aquel banco de terciopelo, con un derrumbamiento final de toda coherencia, se invitó a sí mismo al sosiego de la indiscreción—. ¿Cuándo podré hacerme con él en serio?

El pequeño Bilham, que meditaba, le observó con bondad casi paternal.

—¿No le gusta esto?

Strether se echó a reír, pues el tono había sido ciertamente gracioso. Acto seguido se lanzó:

—¿Qué tiene que ver eso? Lo único que tengo derecho a enfocar con placer es la sensación de contribuir a que cambie de opinión. Por este motivo le he preguntado si cree usted que de veras lo estoy consiguiendo. ¿Es una persona —y aquí hizo lo posible por manifestar que no quería más que certezahonrada?

El compañero parecía de confianza, pero lo parecía a través de una breve, leve sonrisa.

—¿A qué persona se refiere?

Fue tras la enunciación de lo anterior cuando hicieron una muda pausa durante unos momentos.

—¿Es falso que sea hombre libre? ¿Cómo, en tal caso —preguntó Strether con perplejidad—, dispone su vida?

—¿Es Chad la persona de que usted habla? —dijo el pequeño Bilham.

Strether, con creciente esperanza, procuró reflexionar.

—Tenemos que considerarlos uno por uno. —Pero su coherencia se desvaneció—. ¿*Hay* alguna mujer de la que, claro está, tenga miedo o que lo maneje a su antojo?

—Muy encantador de su parte —observó Bilham en aquel momento—: no habérmelo preguntado antes.

—¡Oh, no estoy hecho para mi trabajo!

La exclamación se le había escapado a nuestro amigo, pero contribuyó poco a que Bilham fuera más prudente.

—Chad es un caso raro —observó con inspiración—. Ha cambiado una barbaridad —añadió.

—¿También usted lo ha notado?

—¿La forma en que ha mejorado? Oh, sí, yo creo que todos tienen que haberse dado cuenta. Pero no estoy seguro —dijo el pequeño Bilham— de que no me gustase también en su anterior circunstancia.

—¿Se trata entonces de una circunstancia realmente nueva?

—Bueno —repuso el joven tras un momento—, no creo que haya querido mejorar tanto por propia naturaleza. Es como la nueva edición de un libro antiguo al que hemos tenido cariño, corregida y aumentada, puesta al día, aunque no exactamente como la conocíamos y queríamos. En cualquier caso y sea como fuere-prosiguió—, ¿sabe?, yo no creo que esté jugando, como usted dice, a ningún juego. Creo que quiere muy en serio volver y hacerse una profesión. Y es capaz de hacerse una, ¿sabe?, que termine de mejorarlo y dilatarlo más aún. Ya no será, de ninguna de las maneras —observó el pequeño Bilham—, mi agradable, gastado y anticuado volumen. Claro que yo soy inveteradamente inmoral. Me temo que sería, todo entero, un mundo divertido: un mundo con las cosas como a mí me gustan. Presumo que debiera irme a casa y ocuparme de mis asuntos. Sólo que, más bien, sencillamente, moriría: así de sencillo. Y no tengo la menor dificultad en predisponerme a que no ocurra, en saber exactamente por qué y en defender mi terreno de todos los contendientes. Del mismo modo —resumió—, le aseguro a usted que yo no digo nada en contra, a él personalmente, es decir, a Chad. No le miento si le digo que me parece lo mejor para él. ¿Sabe usted?, no es un hombre feliz.

—¿De veras? —Strether le miraba con atención—. Me daba la sensación de que se trataba de todo lo contrario: de un caso extraordinario de equilibrio consumado y mantenido.

—Oh, hay mucha cosa oculta.

—Ah, ahí es donde está usted —exclamó Strether—. Es exactamente lo que quería saber. Usted habla del conocido volumen que se ha alterado hasta volverse irreconocible. Pues bien, ¿quién es el editor?

El pequeño Bilham le estuvo observando durante un minuto de silencio.

—Debería casarse. Sería muy oportuno. Además, quiere hacerlo.

—¿Quiere casarse con ella?

Nuevamente, durante un momento, Bilham hizo una pausa e, intuyendo que iba a recibir más información, Strether apenas sabía lo que iba a oír.

—Quiere ser libre. No está acostumbrado, ya sabe —el joven se explicaba•a su lúcida manera—, a ser tan bueno.

Strether vaciló.

—Entonces, ¿he de deducir de lo que usted me dice que es bueno?

Bilham hizo, por su lado, una nueva pausa; pero hubo una serena plenitud en su forma de componerla.

—Ha de deducirlo.

—Bueno, en tal caso, ¿por qué no es libre? Él me jura que lo es, aunque no hay nada, excepción hecha de su amabilidad para conmigo, que lo demuestre; y no podría comportarse muy de otro modo si no lo fuera. Mi pregunta se refiere precisamente a esta extraña sensación de diplomacia; como si, en vez de estar cediendo terreno, en realidad su objetivo fuera retenerme aquí para darme un mal ejemplo.

Mientras se cumplía la media hora de estancia, Strether pagaba la cuenta y el camarero contaba el cambio. Nuestro amigo dejó una parte del mismo y, tras un ampuloso agradecimiento, el personaje en cuestión se retiró.

—Es usted demasiado generoso —se permitió observar con amabilidad el pequeño Bilham.

—Oh, siempre soy demasiado generoso —dijo Strether con un suspiro de desamparo—. Pero —prosiguió, como para apartar de sí rápidamente aquella imagen amenazadora— no ha respondido usted a mi pregunta. ¿Por qué no es libre?

El pequeño Bilham se había levantado como si la transacción con el camarero hubiera sido una señal y se había situado ya entre la mesa y el diván. El resultado de esta operación fue que un minuto más tarde abandonaban el lugar, el recompensado camarero, otra vez alerta, situado ya en la puerta. Strether se había sorprendido cediendo ante la brusquedad del compañero consistente en la alusión de que sería satisfecho en su pregunta en cuanto se encontrasen menos acompañados. Y esto ocurrió cuando, tras unos cuantos pasos por el exterior, doblaron la esquina más cercana. Nuestro amigo volvió a exponerla allí.

—¿Por qué no es libre, si es bueno?

El pequeño Bilham le miró de hito en hito.

—Porque se trata de un vínculo virtuoso.

Había satisfecho esto la pregunta con tanta eficacia por entonces —es decir, durante los días que siguieron— que casi había devuelto la vitalidad a Strether. Hay que añadir, sin embargo, que, gracias a su frecuente hábito de agitar la botella en que la vida le ofrecía el vino de la experiencia, que a la sazón se encontraba, como de costumbre, con que saboreaba hasta las heces. Su imaginación, en otras palabras, se había puesto a funcionar ya con la afirmación del joven amigo; de donde surgió algo que hubo de brotar en la precisa ocasión siguiente de ver a María Gostrey. Esta ocasión, además, había estado determinada por una nueva circunstancia: una circunstancia respecto de la que él era el último hombre en dejar a la mujer en la ignorancia durante un solo día.

—Cuando le dije anoche —dijo inmediatamente— que sin una palabra suya, concreta e inmediata, que me capacitase para hablar a los de allá acerca de nuestra partida, o por lo menos de la mía, para notificarles alguna fecha, mi responsabilidad se tornaba molesta y mi situación incómoda; cuando le dije esto, ¿qué cree usted que me respondió? —Y acto seguido, cuando, esta vez, se abstuvo la mujer de hablar—: Bueno, pues que tiene dos amigas especiales, dos señoras, madre e hija, a punto de llegar a París tras cierta ausencia; y que quiere tan enérgicamente presentármelas, que las conozca y que me sean simpáticas que debo complacerle no poniendo en crisis, con toda amabilidad, nuestro asunto hasta que haya tenido oportunidad de verlas otra vez. ¿Es así —preguntó Strether como prepara su marcha? Son las personas —manifestó— que sin duda fue a ver antes de que yo llegara. Las mejores amigas que tiene en el mundo y las que más se interesan por cuanto le afecta a él. Y como yo soy el mejor amigo que les sigue en la escala, ve mil razones por las que debemos conocernos con complacencia. No abordó antes el tema porque su llegada era insegura y, de hecho, parecía imposible incluso en este momento. Pero no ha hecho más que insinuar que, créalo, su deseo de ampliar mi círculo de amistades está en relación con los irresueltos problemas de ellas.

—¿Y se mueren de ganas de verle? —preguntó la señorita Gostrey.

—Se mueren. Naturalmente —dijo Strether—, ellas son el vínculo virtuoso. —Él ya le había contado aquello: la había visto durante el día siguiente al que hablara con el pequeño Bilham; y se habían puesto a discutir entonces las implicaciones de la revelación. Ella le había ayudado a poner en buena lógica lo que el pequeño Bilham le había entregado con ciertas deficiencias. Strether no había presionado al joven respecto del objeto de la preferencia tan inesperadamente descrita; porque experimentaba, en presencia de aquello, con uno de sus irreprimibles escrúpulos, una delicadeza a partir de la cual, en la búsqueda del muy otro elemento, había conseguido liberarse con suficiencia. Se había cuidado, como por un menudo principio de orgullo, de permitir que su joven amigo mencionara un nombre; pues deseaba hacer ver, con esto, que los virtuosos vínculos de Chad no eran asunto suyo. No había querido, desde el principio, pensar demasiado en su dignidad; pero esto no era motivo para no permitir que se diera algún pequeño beneficio. A menudo se había preguntado en qué medida pasaría por interesada su interferencia; de manera que no había carencia de lujo en permitir que se viese, siempre que pudiera, que él no cometía injerencias. Que, por supuesto, no

le había privado, paralelamente, del lujo complementario de muy íntimo aturdimiento; el cual, sin embargo, había sometido a cierto orden antes de comunicar lo que sabía. Cuando hubo hecho esto, por fin, no fue sin la observación de que, por muy sorprendida que ella, al igual que él, pudiera haber estado al principio, la mujer había de convenir probablemente con él en que tal estado de cosas, a fin de cuentas, encajaba con las confirmadas apariencias. Nada, a decir verdad, en todas aquellas indicaciones, habría podido significar un cambio mayor que un vínculo virtuoso, y puesto que habían andado en busca de la «palabra», como decían los franceses, de aquel cambio, la revelación del pequeño Bilham —aunque tan prolongada y extrañamente diferida— serviría tan a la perfección como cualquier otra. La mujer había asegurado a Strether, luego de una pausa, que cuanto más reflexionaba sobre dicha revelación tanto más útil se le antojaba; pese a todo, aquella muestra de seguridad femenina no importó tanto al hombre como el hecho de que, antes de separarse, no se hubiera atrevido el hombre a tantear la sinceridad de la mujer. ¿No creía ella que el vínculo en cuestión era virtuoso?: con la ayuda de esta pregunta había de asegurarse el hombre de la opinión de la mujer en otra ocasión. Las noticias que dio a la susodicha en el curso de esta segunda ocasión fueron, por si fuera poco, de tal índole que habrían de contribuir a asegurarse más aún. Ella pareció al principio, sin embargo, únicamente divertida.

—¿Dice usted que son dos? Una relación con ambas tiene que ser, me parece a mí, necesariamente inocente.

Nuestro amigo consideró la opinión, pero tenía ya un hilo cogido.

—¿No puede encontrarse todavía en la etapa de no saber con seguridad cuál de las dos, madre o hija, le gusta más?

La mujer seguía reflexionando.

—Oh, sin duda la hija... por la edad.

—Es posible. Sin embargo, ¿qué sabemos —preguntó Strether— acerca de ella? Tal vez sea lo bastante mayor.

—¿Bastante para qué?

—Bueno, para casarse con Chad. ¿Sabe?, es posible que sea eso lo que quieran. Y si Chad lo desea también y asimismo el pequeño Bilham, e incluso *nosotros,* en caso de necesidad, aportáramos lo nuestro, es decir, si ella no impide la repatriación, bueno, puede ser que aún nos embarquemos.

Ocurríale siempre en tales conversaciones que las observaciones femeninas[3], según iban surgiendo, parecían caer en un profundo pozo. En cualquier caso tuvo que esperar un momento para sentir la ligera salpicadura de la siguiente:

—Si el señor Newsome quiere casarse con la joven no entiendo por qué no lo ha hecho ya o no se ha preparado sin que se le notificase a usted. Y si lo que quiere es casarse con ella y estar en buenas relaciones con las dos, ¿por qué no es «libre»?

Strether, muy interesado, se preguntó aquello también.

—A lo mejor no le gusta a la muchacha.

—Entonces ¿por qué habla de ellas como lo hace?

El cerebro de Strether repitió la pregunta, pero procuró salirle al encuentro.

—Es posible que las buenas relaciones las mantenga con la madre.

—¿A diferencia de la hija?

—Bueno, si lo que hace ella es convencer a la hija para que acepte al joven, ¿qué otra cosa podría hacer la madre en favor suyo? Claro que —dijo Strether—, ¿por qué no iba la hija a aceptarle?

—Oh —dijo la señorita Gostrey—, ¿es que no puede haber nadie menos impresionado por él que usted?

—¿Quiere usted decir que no le considera un joven «de partido»? ¿A esto es a lo que he venido? —preguntó audible y más bien seriamente—. Sin embargo —prosiguió— lo que más desea la madre de Chad es el matrimonio de éste, es decir, si nos sirve de algo. Aunque, ¿acaso no nos ayudaría *cualquier* matrimonio? Deben querer —ya había cavilado él al respecto— lo mejor para él. Casi todas las mujeres con que podría casarse tendrían un interés directo en hacerse cargo de sus posibilidades. No convendría *a ella* que él las desperdiciase.

La señorita Gostrey discutió aquello.

—No: usted se desenvuelve la mar de bien. Pero, claro, por otro lado está siempre el entrañable y viejo Woollett.

—Oh, claro —meditó el hombre—, siempre está el entrañable y viejo Woollett.

La mujer hizo una breve pausa.

—Es posible que la damisela no se vea capaz de engullir *tanto.* Tal vez piense que es un precio demasiado alto. Acaso compare las opciones detenidamente.

Strether, inagotable en estas conversaciones, tomó la palabra a su vez.

—Todo dependerá de quién sea ella. Esto, naturalmente, la probada capacidad para entendérselas con

el entrañable y viejo Woollett, ya que estoy seguro de que ella tiene relaciones con éste, es lo que más cuenta para Mamie.

—¿Mamie?

El hombre se detuvo durante un instante, al percatarse del tono femenino, delante de la mujer; luego, no obstante percibir que aquello no representaba vaguedad, sino absoluta confusión momentánea, permitió el estallido de su propia exclamación:

—¡No habrá olvidado usted lo de Mamie!

—No, no me he olvidado de lo de Mamie —dijo ella con una sonrisa—. No hay duda de que, sea lo que fuere, hay mucho que decir en favor de ella. ¡Mamie es *mi* personaje clave! —afirmó llanamente.

Strether reanudó su paseo durante unos instantes.

—Es sumamente encantadora, ya sabe; mucho más guapa que las chicas que llevo vistas aquí.

—Eso es justamente sobre lo que quizá más me he apoyado. —Y meditó durante un momento a la manera de su amigo—: Decididamente, me gustaría hacerme con ella.

El hombre acogió de buen humor la fantasía, aunque, ciertamente, acabó desaprobándola.

—Oh, no se pase usted al bando de ella, llevada de su celo. Yo la necesito al máximo y no puedo, ya sabe, sufrir el abandono. Pero ella persistía.

—Si en virtud del excelente uso que yo podría hacer de ella me la mandasen tan sólo.

—Si la conocieran a usted —replicó él— se la enviarían.

—Ah, pero ¿es que no me conocen? ¿Después de que, si no le he entendido mal, usted les ha hablado de mí?

Él se había detenido otra vez delante de ella, pero continuó su itinerario.

— *Quieren,* en vista, según dice usted, de mis actos. —Con lo que abordó el detalle que, a fin de cuentas, más le interesaba—. Al parecer se descubre ya el juego de nuestro, joven. No ha estado haciendo otra cosa: retenerme desde el principio. Las estaba esperando a ellas.

La señorita Gostrey frunció los labios.

—¡Y usted ve en ello un buen entendimiento!

—Dudo que sepa ver tanto como usted. ¿Quiere hacerme creer acaso —prosiguió— que usted no ve...?

—Bueno, ¿qué? —presionó ella cuando el hombre se detuvo.

—Bueno, que tiene que haber muchas cosas entre ellas... y que ha sido así desde el principio, incluso desde antes de que yo apareciese.

La mujer se tomó un minuto para responder.

—¿Quiénes son ellas... ya que la cosa es tan seria?

—Es posible que no sea seria: a lo mejor es graciosa. Pero en cualquier caso es notable. Sólo que yo no sé —hubo de admitir Strether— nada de ellas. Su nombre, por ejemplo, era algo que, luego de la información del pequeño Bilham, me revitalizaba no sentirme obligado a indagar.

—Oh —replicó ella—, si piensa usted que va a escaparse...

La carcajada femenina provocó en él un momentáneo malhumor.

—No pienso que vaya a escapar. Lo único que pienso es que tengo un respiro durante cinco minutos. Me atrevo a decir que, en el mejor de los casos, *tendré* que continuar. —Cruzaron una detenida mirada y al cabo de un instante el hombre recuperaba el buen humor—. No tengo, sin embargo, el menor interés por saber su nombre.

—¿Ni siquiera su nacionalidad? ¿Norteamericana, francesa, inglesa, polaca?

—Me importa un comino —dijo sonriendo— su nacionalidad. Sería estupendo que fueran polacas —añadió casi inmediatamente.

—Estupendo, sin duda. —La transición espoleó su ingenio—. De modo que sí le importa.

El hombre rindió al argumento una modificada justicia.

—Creo que me importaría si *fueran* polacas. Sí —recapacitó—, puede que sea divertido.

—Esperémoslo, pues. —Pero tras esto se acercó un poco más al punto decisivo—. Si la chica está en edad adecuada, está claro que la madre no puede estarlo. Lo digo por el vínculo virtuoso. Si la muchacha tiene veinte años, y no puede tener menos, la madre ha de tener cuarenta como mínimo. Esto descarta a la madre. Es demasiado mayor para él.

Strether, detenido otra vez, consideró aquello y expuso sus peros.

—¿Lo cree usted así? ¿Piensa que hay *alguien* que sea demasiado mayor para él? Yo tengo ochenta y soy demasiado joven. Aunque tal vez la muchacha —continuó— no tenga veinte. Es posible que sólo tenga diez, pero con tanto encanto que Chad encuentre atractivo su trato. Acaso sólo cinco. A lo mejor la madre no tiene sino veinticinco y sea una viuda joven y agradable.

La señorita Gostrey acarició la sugerencia.

—¿Es viuda, entonces?

—No tengo la menor idea. —Nuevamente, a despecho de aquella vaguedad, intercambiaron una mirada: una mirada que fue, acaso, la más prolongada. De hecho, lo siguiente que arguyeron, pareció necesitar una explicación; cosa que ocurrió del mejor modo posible—. Yo sólo creo lo que ya le he dicho: que él tiene sus motivos.

La imaginación de la señorita Gostrey había emprendido su propio vuelo.

—A lo mejor *no* es viuda.

Strether pareció aceptar la posibilidad con reservas. Sin embargo lo aceptó.

—Ahí tenemos por qué la relación, si lo es con ella, es virtuosa.

Pero la mujer apenas si pareció escucharle.

—¿Por qué ha de ser virtuosa si, dado que ella es libre, nada hay que imponga tal condición?

El hombre se rió de aquella pregunta.

—Oh, quizá haya exagerado yo en cuanto a la virtud. ¿Cree usted que sólo puede ser virtuosa la relación, cualquiera que sea el valor que demos al término, si ella *no* es libre? ¿Qué es, entonces, lo que corresponde —preguntó— a esta mujer?

—Ah, ésa es cuestión aparte. —El hombre nada dijo por el momento y la mujer no tardó en continuar —. Me atrevería a decir que tiene usted razón, en cualquier caso, respecto del pequeño plan del señor Newsome. Le *ha* estado probando: ha estado informando de usted a sus amigas.

Strether, mientras tanto, había tenido tiempo de pensar un poco.

—¿Dónde está, pues, su rectitud?

—Bueno, como decimos nosotros, lucha, se esfuerza, se afirma en la medida en que puede. Nosotros podemos estar de parte, ya ve, de su rectitud. Podemos ayudarle. Pero él ha descubierto ya —dijo la señorita Gostrey— que usted va a hacerlo.

—¿Hacerlo por qué?

—Caramba, por *ellas,* por *ces dames.* El le ha observado, analizado, usted le ha gustado... y ha admitido que *deben.* Es un gran elogio para usted, querido; pues estoy segura de que son personas especiales. Le espera a usted el éxito. Caramba —afirmó la mujer con alegría—, ¡como que ya lo tiene!

El hombre asimiló aquellas cosas con paciencia momentánea y acto seguido se volvió con brusquedad. Siempre le convenía que hubiera muchas cosas bellas que mirar en el aposento femenino. Pero el examen de un par de ellas pronto pareció haber determinado una conversación que poco tenía que ver con las mismas.

—¡Usted no se lo cree!

—¿El qué?

—El carácter de la relación. Su inocencia. La mujer se defendió.

—No pretendo conocer nada al respecto. Todo es posible. Debemos ver antes.

—¿Ver? —repitió él con un gemido—. ¿No hemos visto bastante?

—Yo no —dijo ella con una sonrisa.

—¿Supone usted que el pequeño Bilham ha mentido?

—Debe usted averiguarlo.

Aquello casi hizo palidecer al hombre.

—¿Averiguar más?

El hombre se había dejado caer en su sofá, desfallecido; pero pareció que era la mujer, que estaba muy cerca de él, la que iba a decir la última palabra.

—¿Acaso no ha venido usted para averiguarlo *todo?*

Libro quinto

I

El domingo de la semana siguiente fue un día maravilloso y Chad Newsome hizo que su amigo supiera por anticipado que ya se había asegurado al respecto. Se había planteado ya la cuestión de que lo llevase a ver al gran Gloriani, que estaba en casa los domingos por la tarde y en cuya casa, por regla general, había menos previsible aburrimiento que en otra parte; pero el proyecto, en virtud de no sé qué accidente, no había tenido aplicación instantánea. A la sazón, sin embargo, hubo de resucitarse en más felices circunstancias. Chad había señalado que el celebrado escultor poseía un jardín tan antiguo como singular, respecto del cual —primavera al cabo, plena y radiante— el tiempo era favorable; y dos o tres subsiguientes

alusiones vinieron a confirmar a Strether la expectativa de algo especial. Por entonces, él se había dejado llevar temerariamente, a pesar de todas las presentaciones y aventuras, y acariciaba la idea de que, le enseñase el joven lo que le enseñara, era él quien, a fin de cuentas, se enseñaba a sí mismo. A decir verdad, habría podido desear, mientras sucedían estas cosas, que Chad fuera menos un simple cicerone, pues no estaba privado de la sensación, ahora que la imagen de su juego, su plan, su docta diplomacia, se había afirmado, de que buscaba refugio ante las realidades de su vida social en el fácil chantaje, como nuestro amigo decía para sí, del *panem et circenses.* Nuestro amigo seguía sintiéndose bastante contenido en cuanto a emociones[4], aunque hacía en sus restantes momentos la irritada inferencia de que aquello se debía únicamente a su innata y odiosa suspicacia respecto de cualquier forma de belleza. Periódicamente se decía a sí mismo —pues sus reacciones eran bruscas— que no debía conocer la verdad de nada mientras no se desembarazase primero de aquello.

Había sabido de antemano que Mme. de Vionnet y su hija estarían visibles probablemente, intimación que había constituido la única referencia de Chad respecto de sus buenas amigas del sur. El efecto surtido por la conversación sobre ellas sostenida por Strether y la señorita Gostrey había bastado para consagrar su pusilanimidad al espionaje; algo contenido en el mismo aire del silencio de Chad —juzgado a la luz de la conversación antedicha— le ofrecía como una reserva con que podía compaginar a las claras. Esto las envolvía con lo que él apenas sabía: una consideración, una distinción; estaría delante, de todos modos —mientras la circunstancia mencionada lo situase allí—, de dos señoras, y lo único que estaba claro para él era que ellas, a su vez, en la medida de la responsabilidad masculina, estarían en presencia de un caballero. ¿Era porque ambas eran muy hermosas, muy inteligentes, incluso muy buenas? ¿Era por uno de estos motivos por lo que Chad estaba, por así decir, acicateando su impresión? ¿Quería catapultarlas, según frase de Woollett, con la máxima fuerza-para confundir su espíritu crítico, por insignificante que fuera éste—, con alguna forma de mérito exquisitamente incalculable? En última instancia, lo más que había preguntado a su compañero era si las personas en cuestión eran francesas, inquisición que no había sido sino apropiado comentario al sonido de su nombre.

—Sí. ¡Es decir, no! —había sido la respuesta de Chad, aunque había añadido a continuación que el inglés de las dos mujeres era el más encantador del mundo, de modo que si lo que Strether andaba buscando era un pretexto para no hacer buenas migas con ellas no encontraría ninguno. A decir verdad, nunca —con el humor en que el lugar le había sumido rápidamente— había sentido Strether menos necesidad de un pretexto. Los que habría podido encontrar habrían sido, en el peor de los casos, pretextos para con los demás, para con las personas que estaban ante él, en cuya libertad para ser como eran sabía él que se regocijaba sin vacilaciones. Los huéspedes de su compañero se multiplicaban y aquellas cosas, su libertad, su intensidad, su variedad, su dilatada situación se fundían en el admirable medio del escenario.

El lugar mismo causaba una gran impresión: un pabellón pequeño, de fachada despejada y apartado, un efecto de *parquet* pulimentado, de paneles blancos y delicados, y dorados amarillentos y superfluos, decoración refinada y rara en el centro del Faubourg St.-Germain y en la periferia de un apiñamiento de jardines adjuntos a nobles y antiguas casas. Alejado de las calles e insospechado por la multitud, alcanzable por mediación de un largo pasaje y un patio tranquilo, sorprendía tanto a la atención no preparada, cuando en el acto se veía, como un tesoro que se desentierra; produciendo en dicho ánimo, además, la nota, principalmente, de la categoría de la ciudad inconmensurable y barriendo de un golpe los habituales mojones y fronteras. Fue en el jardín, un anexo espacioso y cuidado al que ya se había trasladado una docena de personas, donde el huésped de Chad las conoció; mientras los altos árboles, asediados por los pájaros y agitados a causa del tiempo y la primavera, y los elevados muros, al otro lado de los cuales se alzaban severos *hôtels* en su intimidad, hablaban de supervivencia, transmisión, asociación, un orden notable, indiferente, persistente. El día era tan apacible que el pequeño grupo se había trasladado al aire libre; pero el aire libre, dadas las circunstancias, era todo un consejo de estado. Strether tenía en aquel momento la sensación de estar en un gran convento, un convento misional, célebre por lo poco que sabía, un plantel de jóvenes sacerdotes, de sombras dispersas de callejones rectos y campanas de iglesia que arrojaban su masa en una dirección; intuía nombres en el aire, fantasmas en las ventanas, señales e indicios, toda una gama de expresiones a su alrededor, demasiado densa para la rápida distinción.

Aquel asalto de imágenes se convirtió por un momento, en el domicilio del distinguido escultor, casi en esplendoroso. Gloriani le mostró, con absoluta confianza, cuando Chad se lo presentó, una cara desmejorada, bella y de rasgos delicados, una cara que era como una carta abierta y escrita en idioma extraño. Con el genio en los ojos, los modales en los labios, su prolongada experiencia profesional a sus espaldas y sus medallas y recompensas alrededor, el gran artista, en el decurso de una sola y sostenida mirada y unas pocas palabras de aprecio en la presentación, impresionó a nuestro amigo como un deslumbrante prodigio de persona. Strether había visto en los museos —en el Luxemburgo, así como, con mayor reverencia, en días pasados, en el Nueva York de los multimillonarios las obras de aquellas manos;

sin desconocer asimismo que, tras una primera época en su Roma natal, había emigrado, en plena actividad profesional, a París, donde, con lustre personal casi violento, brillaba en medio de una constelación; todo lo cual era más que suficiente para coronarlo, según el invitado, con la luz, con el poema de la gloria. Strether, en contacto con ese elemento con que nunca había intimado tanto, tenía plena conciencia de estar abriéndole, durante el feliz instante, todas las ventanas de su intelecto, de dejar que su interioridad más bien mediocre se embriagase por una vez con el sol de un clima no advertido en su vieja geografía. Iba a ver más de una vez, en el recuerdo, el rostro redondo del italiano, en que cada rasgo era el rasgo propio de un artista, en que el tiempo hablaba sólo en calidad de buen tono y consagración; y había de recordar en especial, como la penetrante radiación, acto comunicativo del ilustre espíritu, la manera en que, mientras estaban brevemente, para la recepción y las presentaciones, cara a cara, le habían mirado ininterrumpidamente los ojos del escultor. No los olvidaría demasiado pronto, antes bien pensaría en ellos, por inconscientes, carentes de intención y preocupados que fueran, como la matriz del más profundo sondeo intelectual a que había sido sometido en su vida. Iba, en efecto, a fomentar generosamente su perspectiva del hecho, a jugar con ésta en el curso de las horas ociosas; no hablando del acontecimiento con nadie y firme sabedor de que no podría hablar sin parecer que decía insensateces. ¿Le había contado dicho acontecimiento o le había pedido el mayor de los misterios? ¿Se trataba del más especial de los destellos, sin igual, supremo, de la antorcha estética, que iluminaba aquel maravilloso mundo para siempre, o se trataba, ante todo, del largo y derecho dardo que se clava gracias a la agudeza personal que la vida ha asegurado al acero? Nada habría resultado más extraño y nadie, sin duda, se habría sorprendido más que el artista mismo, pero fue, ni que decir tiene, para Strether, en aquellos instantes, como si en relación con su aceptada misión hubiera sido sometido a juicio. La intensa experiencia humana de la encantadora sonrisa de Gloriani —¡oh, cuánta vida ocultaba!— había caído sobre él como prueba de su temple.

Chad, mientras tanto, tras haber mencionado su nombre con desenvoltura, se había alejado con desenvoltura no menor y saludaba ya a otras personas. Era Chad tan desenvuelto y artero con el gran artista como con su oscuro compatriota, y tan desenvuelto con todos los demás como con ellos. Esto ocupó su lugar en las consideraciones de Strether y arrojó casi una nueva luz, proporcionándole, como por concatenación, algo más de que gozar. Simpatizaba con Gloriani, pero no habría de volver a verle; de esto estaba del todo seguro. Chad, en consecuencia, que tan estupendo era con ambos, era una especie de vínculo para la desesperanzada fantasía, una implicación de posibilidades... ¡oh, si todo hubiera sido diferente! Strether observó, de todos modos, que estaba así en consonancia con los espíritus ilustres y también que —sí, distintamente— al final no se había jactado de ello. Nuestro amigo no había ido allí sólo por aquella figura del hijo de Abel Newsome, pero ésta amenazaba afectar al observador como factor incuestionablemente central. Gloriani, en efecto, tras recordar no sé qué y musitar una disculpa, fue en busca de Chad para hablar con él y Strether se quedó meditando multitud de cosas. Una de éstas era la cuestión de si, puesto que lo habían probado, había pasado la prueba. ¿Le había abandonado el artista tras descubrir que no? Intuía que en aquella precisa jornada podía desenvolverse mejor que de costumbre. ¿No se había conducido suficientemente bien, en este sentido, al sentirse tan deslumbrado y al no haber, asimismo, según a medias creía, ocultado enteramente a su anfitrión que intuía la indagación[5] del segundo? De pronto, por la otra parte del jardín, vio que se acercaba el pequeño Bilham y una parte del impulso que le dominaba consistió en que, cuando los ojos de ambos se encontraron, adivinase lo que *él* sabía. Si le hubiera dicho al instante lo que predominaba, habría manifestado: *«¿He* pasado la prueba? Pues, naturalmente, sé que hay que pasar una». El pequeño Bilham le habría tranquilizado, le habría dicho que exageraba y habría alegado felizmente el argumento de la propia presencia del pequeño Bilham, que, a decir verdad, según podía ver, se comportaba tan desenvueltamente como el propio Gloriani o Chad. Al cabo de un rato tal vez dejaría de estar asustado, buscaría el punto de vista adecuado para algunas de las caras —tipos enormemente extraños, extraños para Woollett— que ya había empezado a tener en cuenta. ¿Quiénes eran todos aquellos, los grupos y parejas repartidos, las damas, más chocantes incluso para Woollett que los caballeros?: no otra fue la pregunta que, una vez que le hubo saludado el joven amigo, se sorprendió formulándose a sí mismo.

—Oh, ellos son todos: de todas las clases y tamaños; quiero decir, claro está, dentro de un limite, aunque los limites se rompen quizá con mayor frecuencia que se establecen. Siempre hay artistas: él es estupendo e inimitable con el *cher confrère; y* también *gros bonnets* de todas las especies: embajadores, ministros, banqueros, generales, ¿qué sé yo?, incluso judíos. En primer lugar, siempre, algunas mujeres extraordinariamente agradables, aunque nunca demasiado; a veces una actriz, un artista, un intérprete, pero sólo si no eran monstruos; y, especialmente, las apropiadas *femmes du monde.* Puede usted imaginarse su historia en este sentido: para mí es fabulosa; *nunca* le contrarían. Y sin embargo los tiene en un puño: nadie sabe cómo se las ingenia; es demasiado hermoso y apacible. Nunca demasiado, pero al mismo tiempo lo superior; un surtido sencillamente perfecto. Aunque nunca se aburre nadie; siempre ha sido así; él tiene un

secreto. Es extraordinario. Y uno no llega a descubrirlo. Es igual para todos. No hace preguntas.

—Ah, ¿no? —Strether se echó a reír.

Bilham interpretó aquello con la mayor inocencia.

—¿Cómo, si no, estaría yo aquí?

—Oh, a causa de lo que usted me ha dicho. Forma usted parte del surtido perfecto.

Bueno, el joven se hizo cargo del conjunto:

—Parece que hoy es bastante bueno.

Strether siguió la dirección de su mirada.

—¿Son todas, esta vez, *femmes du monde?*

El pequeño Bilham puso de manifiesto su competencia.

—Medianamente.

Era aquella una categoría para la que nuestro amigo tenía sus sentimientos particulares; una luz, romántica y misteriosa, sobre el elemento femenino, en que se gozó contemplarlo durante unos momentos.

—¿Hay alguna polaca?

El compañero lo comprobó.

—Me parece distinguir a una portuguesa[6]. Pero he visto turcas.

Strether se quedó cavilando, deseoso de justicia.

—Parecen, las mujeres digo, muy armoniosas.

—Oh, de cerca es innegable. —Y a continuación, mientras Strether recelaba su temor de tales proximidades, aunque concediéndose otra vez el detalle de las armonías—: Bueno-prosiguió el pequeño Bilham—, esto es, en el peor de los casos, ya sabe, algo que está muy bien. Si le prueba y piensa de esta manera, ello pone de relieve que uno no está desplazado. Pero siempre se sabe todo —añadió con elegancia — inmediatamente.

A Strether le probaba y pensaba de aquella manera sencillamente en demasía; de modo que:

—Por favor, conmigo nada de trampas —murmuró con notable desamparo.

—Bueno —replicó el joven—, es que es un hombre maravillosamente amable con *nosotros.*

—¿Con nosotros los norteamericanos, dice usted?

—Oh, no: él no sabe nada de *eso.* Buena parte del problema consiste en que aquí nunca se oye hablar de política. Olvidémosla. A lo que yo me refiero es a los jóvenes desgraciados de todos los colores. Y, sin embargo, siempre resulta tan encantador como lo que usted ve ahora; es como si, por algo que hubiera en el ambiente, no se nos notara la miseria. Esto nos hace retroceder al siglo pasado.

—Me temo —dijo Strether, divertido—, que a mí me hace más bien avanzar; oh, y muy lejos.

—¿Al próximo? ¿No será sólo —preguntó el pequeño Bilham— porque pertenece usted al siglo anterior?

—¿Al siglo anterior al pasado? ¡Gracias! —dijo Strether riendo—. Si le preguntase por alguna de esas señoras, difícil me sería, espécimen del rococó como soy, complacerla.

—Oh, todo lo contrario; ellos adoran, todos los de aquí adoramos el rococó; ¿y qué mejor lugar para esta adoración que el sitio en que estamos, con el pabellón y el jardín? Hay muchos aquí —el pequeño Bilham sonrió mientras miraba a su alrededor— que tienen colecciones. ¡Está usted a salvo!

Aquello hizo que, durante un momento, se entregara de nuevo a la observación. Había rostros de los que apenas si sabía decir nada. ¿Eran encantadores o únicamente extraños?

No podía hablar de política y sin embargo sospechaba la presencia de más de un polaco. Consecuencia de lo cual fue la pregunta que formuló volviendo la cabeza cuando el amigo se hubo reunido con él.

—¿Han llegado ya Mme. de Vionnet y su hija?

—Aún no las he visto, pero quien ha llegado es la señorita Gostrey. Está en el pabellón admirando los objetos. Salta a la legua que es una coleccionista —añadió el pequeño Bilham sin ánimo de ofender.

—Oh, sí, es coleccionista y sabía que iba a venir. ¿Es también coleccionista Mme. de Vionnet? —agregó Strether.

—Un poco, según creo; casi celebrada. —El joven, tras aquello, miró a su amigo directamente a los ojos, pero no fue sino un instante—. Ya sé, gracias a Chad, a quien vi anoche, que ellas iban a volver; pero ayer. No estaba seguro hasta que ocurriese. Esta será, por consiguiente —añadió el pequeño Bilham—, si es que ya están aquí, su primera aparición tras su regreso.

Strether, sin dilación, se cogió a una de las cosas que había oído.

—¿Se lo dijo Chad anoche? A mí, mientras veníamos, no me dijo nada al respecto.

—¿Se lo preguntó usted?

Strether justipreció la situación.

—Me temo que no.

—Bueno —dijo el pequeño Bilham—, no es usted persona a quien se pueda decir fácilmente nada que

usted no quiera saber. Aunque no es tan difícil, lo admito, sino más bien hermoso —añadió con amabilidad — cuando usted quiere.

Strether le miró con una satisfacción adecuada a su inteligencia.

—¿Es ésa la profunda meditación por la que, en relación con esas señoras, ha estado usted tan callado?

El pequeño Bilham sopesó la profundidad de la meditación.

—No he estado callado. Le hablé a usted de ellas el otro día, el día que paseamos juntos tras tomar el té con Chad.

Strether volvió en sí al oír aquello.

—¿Son ellas, pues, el vínculo virtuoso?

—Lo único que puedo decirle es que ellas han pasado por ahí. Pero ¿no es suficiente? ¿Qué más que una vana apariencia conoce el más sabio de nosotros? Le recomiendo —afirmó el joven con placentero hincapié— la vana apariencia.

Strether miró ampliamente a su alrededor y lo que vio, cara tras cara, intensificó el efecto de las palabras del joven amigo.

—¿Es tan buena?

—Magnífica.

Strether hizo una pausa.

—¿Ha muerto el marido?

—No, querido. Vive.

—¡ Oh! —exclamó Strether. Tras lo cual, en tanto su compañero reía—: ¿Cómo es posible, entonces, que sea tan buena?

—Ya lo sabrá. Es algo que siempre se ve.

—¿Está enamorado Chad de la hija?

—Eso es lo que he querido decir.

Strether estaba asombrado.

—¿Dónde está la dificultad, entonces?

—Caramba, ¿no lo somos usted y yo... con nuestras más grandes y atrevidas ideas?

—¡Las mías! —exclamó Strether con cierta extrañeza. Pero como si quisiera atenuar lo dicho—: ¿Quiere usted decir que no sabrán nada de Woollett?

El pequeño Bilham sonrió.

—¿No es eso lo que ha de averiguar usted?

Esto hubo de ponerles, pues la mujer captó las últimas palabras, en contacto con la señorita Barrace, a quien ya había divisado Strether —ya que él nunca había visto a una dama en una reunión— paseando sola. Al acercarse a los hombres, la mujer había comenzado a hablar y hechóse cargo de todo, mediante sus impertinentes de largo mango, con su gracioso y congraciante porte.

—¡Cuánto, mi pobre señor Strether, parece haber visto usted! Pero no podrá decir —afirmó la mujer alegrementeque no hago lo que puedo por ayudarle. El señor Waymarsh ya está instalado. Lo he dejado en la casa con la señorita Gostrey.

—¡Vaya forma —exclamó el pequeño Bilham— que tiene el señor Strether de convencer a las mujeres para que se pongan a su servicio! Ahora se prepara para meterse en el bolsillo a otra; le ha echado el ojo, ¿se da cuenta?, a Mme. de Vionnet.

—¿A Mme. de Vionnet? ¡Oh, oh, oh! —exclamó la señorita Barrace en maravilloso crescendo. Pero nuestro amigo sabía que había más cosas de las que captaba el oído. ¿Era una broma, a fin de cuentas, que debiera comportarse con seriedad en todo? Como fuera, envidiaba a la señorita Barrace, envidiaba su capacidad para no tener que hacerlo. Parecía la mujer, con sus gritos y protestas, sus rápidas percataciones, sus movimientos semejantes a bruscos ademanes de pájaro que picotea con alegría, estar ante la vida como ante algún escaparate atiborrado. Podía oírse con toda claridad, mientras elegía y señalaba, el leve golpeteo del carey contra el cristal—. Está claro que necesitamos abrir el ojo; pero me alegro de que no sea yo quien tiene que hacerlo. Así se empieza, no hay duda; hasta que, de pronto, se encuentra uno con que ha de renunciar. Es demasiado, demasiado dificil. Son ustedes maravillosos — prosiguió, dirigiéndose a Strether— por no parar mientes en esas cosas, ésas que para mí son las imposibilidades. No las adviertan nunca. Afróntenlas con tal entereza que convierta la observación de usted en una lección.

—Ah, pero —dijo el pequeño Bilham con desánimo¿qué conseguiríamos entonces? Nosotros la tenemos en cuenta a usted y tomamos nota... siempre que haya que llegar al extremo de tomar nota. Pero nada se hace.

—Oh, vamos, señor Bilham —replicó la mujer como con un seco golpe de impaciencia en el cristal—, ¡no vale usted ni un ochavo! Vino a convertir a los salvajes, porque sé que ésa era su idea, lo recuerdo muy

bien, y resulta que los salvajes le han convertido a usted.

—¡De ningún modo! —exclamó el joven con voz lastimera—; no han procedido de tal suerte. Lo que han hecho, ¡los muy caníbales!, es comerme; me han convertido, si usted quiere, pero convertido en comida. No soy sino el mondo esqueleto de un cristiano.

—Bueno, pues así somos. Sólo que —y la señorita Barrace se dirigió otra vez a Strether— no dejen que esto les desanime. Caerán ustedes muy pronto, pero mientras tanto gozarán de sus momentos. *Il faut en avoir*. Tendré mucho gusto en verles mientras duren. Y les diré quién resistirá.

—¿Waymarsh? —la había atajado él.

La mujer se echó a reír como alarmada ante aquello.

—Él resistirá incluso ante la señorita Gostrey; tanta grandeza no puede comprenderse. Es maravilloso.

—Lo es, ciertamente —admitió Strether—. Ni siquiera me hablaría de ese asunto... sólo me dijo que tenía un compromiso; pero con tal malhumor, permítame insistir, que más parecía un compromiso con el patíbulo. Luego, en silencio y en secreto, aparece aquí con usted. ¿Llama usted a *eso* «resistir»?

—Oh, espero que sea resistir-dijo la señorita Barrace—. Pero, como mucho, lo único que hace es tener paciencia conmigo. No comprende ni jota. Es agradabilísimo. Es maravilloso —repitió.

—¡Miguelangelesco! —dijo el pequeño Bilham, completando la idea femenina—. Es un triunfo. Moisés, en el techo, cayó fulminado al suelo; sobrecogedor, colosal, pero en cierto modo llevadero.

—Cierto, si por llevadero quiere decir usted —replicó ella— tener tan buen aspecto en el coche de una. Es muy divertido cuando se pone en su rincón, a mi lado; da la sensación de ser alguien... un extranjero famoso, *en exil;* así que la gente se pregunta, ¡es tan divertido!, de quién hablo. Le enseño París, se lo enseño todo, y él ni pestañea. Parece ese gran jefe indio de quien hablan, que, cuando llega a Washington para ver al Gran Padre, se queda inmóvil envuelto en su manta y sin abrir la boca. Tal como lo toma todo, yo podría ser el Gran Padre. —Estaba complacida por haberse identificado con este personaje: casaba con su carácter; afirmó que era el nombre que a partir de entonces pretendía adoptar—. Y se sienta de una forma, además, en un rincón de mi cuarto, no mirando a quienes me visitan más que con insistencia y como queriendo hacer algo. Ellos se preguntan entonces qué es lo que quiere hacer. Pero es maravilloso —volvió a insistir la señorita Barrace—. Aún no ha hecho nada.

Esto presentaba al hombre, sin embargo, la verdad sea dicha, ante los compañeros de la mujer, que miraba a uno y otro con inteligencia, con franca diversión de parte de Bilham y con un retazo de tristeza por lo que a Strether respectaba. La tristeza de Strether surgió —pues la imagen tenía su grandeza— al pensar lo poco que él, por su parte, se había envuelto en su manta, lo poco que, en los pasillos de mármol, inconscientemente vividos por el Gran Padre, se parecía a un aborigen realmente majestuoso. Pero hizo también otra reflexión.

—Todos los que están aquí gozan de tanto sentido visual que en cierto modo lo han «corrido» ustedes todo. Hay momentos en que se le ocurre a uno que no tienen ustedes nada más.

—Nada de moral —explicó el pequeño Bilham, contemplando con serenidad, al otro lado del jardín, a las diversas *femmes du monde*—. Pero la señorita Barrace tiene una moral sobresaliente —prosiguió con amabilidad; hablando no menos por interés de Strether que por el femenino.

—¿De veras? —preguntó Strether a la casi ilusionada mujer, aun sin saber apenas de qué hablaba el hombre.

—Oh, no sobresaliente —dijo ella, enormemente divertida ante el tono del hombre—, el señor Bilham es demasiado generoso. Pero creo que podría hablar de suficiencia. Sí, suficiencia. ¿Acaso ha pensado usted algo raro de mí? —y volvió a mirarle con fijeza con los impertinentes, con el gracioso interés que esto le confería—. Es usted del todo maravilloso. Le decepcionaría terriblemente. Yo me aferro a mi suficiencia. Pero conozco, lo confieso —prosiguió—, a gente extraña. No sé cómo ocurre; no lo hago adrede; parece que es mi sino... como si yo fuera una de sus costumbres; es maravilloso, me atrevería a decir, además —continuó con interesada gravedad—, que yo, que todos los que aquí estamos, recurramos tanto a la simple mirada. Pero ¿qué le vamos a hacer? Todos nos miramos: y a la luz de París se ve a las cosas como las cosas parecen. Esto es lo que la luz de París suele enseñar siempre. Es culpa de la luz de París... ¡querida luz!

—¡Querido París! —repitió el pequeño Bilham.

—Todo, todos quedan al descubierto —prosiguió la señorita Barrace.

—¿Pero en lo que realmente son? —preguntó Strether.

—Oh, me gusta esos «realmente» bostonianos. Pero a veces... sí.

—¡Querido París, en tal caso! —suspiró Strether con resignación, mientras durante un momento se miraban todos. Entonces dijo—: ¿Le ocurre lo mismo a Mme. de Vionnet? Quiero decir, ¿se muestra según lo que es?

La respuesta de ella fue inmediata:

—Es encantadora. Es perfecta.

—Entonces, ¿por qué hace un minuto exclamó usted «¡Oh, oh, oh!» al oír su nombre?

La mujer lo recordaba.

—Vaya, pues porque... Porque es maravillosa.

—Ah, ¿ella también? —Strether casi emitió un gemido.

Pero la señorita Barrace se había dado cuenta del alivio.

—¿Por qué no se lo pregunta directamente a la persona que mejor puede responderle?

—No —dijo el pequeño Bilham—; no haga ninguna pregunta; mejor espere y juzgue usted mismo: será más divertido. El ha venido para llevarle hasta ella.

II

Con lo que Strether vio que Chad estaba otra vez allí, aunque después apenas sabría, por absurdo que pueda parecer, lo que tan rápidamente había ocurrido. La ocasión le afectaba, sin duda, más intensamente de lo que habría sabido explicar y sufrió en consecuencia un desfile de especulaciones respecto de si, al alejarse con Chad, no se había puesto pálido o rojo. Lo único que tenía claro al respecto era que, por fortuna, no se había dicho nada indiscreto, y que el mismo Chad era, más que nunca, según el buen juicio de la señorita Barrace, maravilloso. Fue uno de los nexos —aunque el porqué de ello, en realidad, no fue tan evidente— en que el entero cambio del hombre afloró del modo más sorprendente. Strether recordó, al ir hacia la casa, que le había impresionado aquella primera noche el que supiera cómo introducirse en un palco. Bueno, el caso es que a la sazón apenas si le impresionaba menos que supiera cómo hacer una presentación. Afectó aquello a la propia cualidad de Strether: lo señaló con el cuño de lo estimable; tanto que nuestro pobre amigo, consciente y pasivo, pareció sentirse realmente entregado y liberado; convertido totalmente, según él mismo habría dicho, en regalo. Al llegar a la casa, una joven, con aire de ir a adelantarse, apareció sola en la escalera; durante cuyo intercambio de palabras con Chad dedujo Strether que, obsequiosamente, con amabilidad, estaba allí para salirles al encuentro. Chad la había dejado en la casa, pero ella se había anticipado medio trayecto y, segundos después, se reunía con ellos en el jardín. El aspecto juvenil de la mujer, para Strether, fue al principio desconcertante, aunque su segunda impresión fue, con no menor contundencia, cierta dosis de alivio por no haberse dado, mientras estuviera con los otros, ningún tipo de libertad respecto de ella. Se le ocurrió de pronto que no era ella tema de tales materias y, en el interregno, mientras Chad le presentaba, ella le había hablado, con gran sencillez y elegancia, en un inglés en que a las claras se veía que se desenvolvía perfectamente, y no obstante distinto de cuantos otros había oído. No parecía ella haber ensayado; nada, según pudo ver tras pasar juntos unos minutos, parecía ensayado en ella; pero su forma de hablar, encantadora, correcta y extraña, era como una precaución para no pasar por polaca. Y las precauciones existían, le pareció entender, sólo cuando había verdadero peligro.

Más tarde recibiría más impresiones al respecto; pero por entonces experimentaría además otras cosas. La mujer vestía de negro, pero de una negrura que se le antojaba luminosa y transparente; era muy rubia y, aunque era notablemente delgada, el rostro poseía cierta redondez, con los ojos separados y un tanto extraños. Su sonrisa era breve y natural; el sombrero, sin extravagancias; tenía, acaso, un aire sonoro, bajo las elegantes mangas negras, procedente del mayor número de pulseras y brazaletes de oro que había visto lucir a una señora. Chad se comportaba con naturalidad y alegría respecto de aquel encuentro; era una de las ocasiones en que más deseaba Strether contar con tales desenvoltura y buen humor:

—Aquí están, pues, frente a frente por fin; están ustedes hechos el uno para el otro: *vous allez voir;* yo bendigo esta unión.

Fue, a decir verdad, una vez se hubo marchado, como si en parte hubiera hablado en serio. Este último movimiento había estado determinado por una pregunta que él había hecho acerca de «Jeanne»; a lo que la madre había replicado que sin duda estaría en la casa con la señorita Gostrey, a quien hacía poco la había encomendado.

—Ah, pero usted sabe —había respondido el joven con alegría— que él tiene que verla —con lo que, mientras Strether aguzaba el oído, el joven se había alejado como si fuese en busca de ella. Strether se asombró de que la señorita Gostrey estuviese ya metida en aquel asunto, y no sin la sensación de que le faltaba un nexo por establecer; pero supo asimismo, pocos segundos después, que le encantaría hablar con ella de Mme. de Vionnet sobre la base de las evidencias presentes.

La evidencia, pese a todo, era ciertamente pequeña; lo cual, si a ello vamos, era quizá un poco el motivo de que sus expectativas hubieran sufrido un descenso. En cierto modo no había abundancia en ella; y abundancia era lo único que, con su simplicidad, habíase imaginado el hombre. Sin embargo, pecaba de excesivo afirmar sin más que no había sino escasez. Se alejaron de la casa y, posando los ojos en un banco lejano, el hombre propuso que tomaran asiento.

—He oído hablar mucho de usted —dijo ella mientras seguían andando; pero el hombre dio una respuesta que hizo detener el paso femenino.

—Pues acerca de *usted,* Mme. de Vionnet, no he oído, me atrevo a decir, casi nada —palabras que se le ocurrieron al hombre como si fueran las únicas que podía pronunciar con alguna lucidez; por consciente que fuera, y con tanta mayor razón, de la determinación de conducirse, respecto de lo restante de sus asuntos, con absoluta llaneza y sin devaneos. No había sido, en cualquier caso y última instancia, su intención espiar la intachable libertad de Chad. Era posible, sin embargo, en aquel preciso instante y bajo el efecto de la pausa de Mme. de Vionnet, que conducirse sin devaneos comenzara a despuntar sus ribetes preocupantes. A fin de cuentas ella tenía que sonreírle siempre con tanta amabilidad para obligarle a preguntarse si no se estaría adentrando ya en camino tortuoso. Tal vez fuera tortuoso que lo único que él vio de pronto con claridad fue que ella quería ser sin ambages lo que él habría calificado de simpática con él. Esto fue lo que ocurrió entre ellos mientras, en el curso de otro momento, se quedaban inmóviles; no pudo recordar después qué más habría podido ser. Lo único en realidad inconfundible fue que le asaltó como una ola la seguridad de que había sido, en situaciones indescifrables e inimaginables, tema de conversación. Él había estado en un terreno que afectaba a la mujer, que entraba en el ámbito de las responsabilidades; cosa que daba a ésta una ventaja que el hombre nunca podría compensar.

—¿No le ha dicho la señorita Gostrey —preguntó la mujer— ni una palabra de mí?

Lo que primero le llamó la atención fue la forma en que se encontraba en un mismo grupo con aquella dama; y se preguntó qué datos habría proporcionado Chad de sus relaciones. Algo a duras penas identificable todavía, en cualquier caso, había tenido lugar.

—Yo ni siquiera sabía que ella la conocía a usted.

—Bueno, luego se lo contaré todo. Me alegro de que tenga usted trato con ella.

Fue aquélla —ese «todo» que la señorita Gostrey había de contarle luego— una de las cosas que, con todos los respetos hacia las actuales preocupaciones, más pesaron en Strether una vez que ambos hubieron tomado asiento. Una de las restantes fue, al cabo de cinco minutos, que ella —oh, sí, de manera incontestable— *discrepaba* menos; es decir que apenas discrepaba, superficialmente hablando, claro, de la señora Newsome y hasta de la señora Pocock. Era mucho más joven que una y no tan joven como la otra; pero ¿qué había en ella, de haber algo, que habría vuelto imposible que él la conociera en Woollett? ¿Y en qué no fue su charla, durante los momentos compartidos en el banco, la misma que se habría estimado conveniente en una reunión en Woollett —salvo, claro está, acaso, en que era totalmente brillante? Hízole notar la mujer que el señor Newsome, según ella sabía, se había sentido muy contento por la visita de Strether; pero no había ninguna buena señora de Woollett que no estuviera, como mínimo, a la altura de tamaña circunstancia. ¿Había en Chad, por casualidad, a fin de cuentas, soterradamente, algún principio de lealtad a sus orígenes que le llevaba, para fines sentimentales, a vincularse a elementos, felizmente encontrados, que le recordaran al máximo las características del terruño? ¿Por qué, en consecuencia, andarse frívolamente —Strether podía decirlo de esta manera— respecto del singular fenómeno de la *femme du monde?* En este sentido, hasta la misma señora Newsome tenía mucho adjudicable a esta categoría. El pequeño Bilham, sin ir más lejos, había testificado que mejoraban, las señoras de dicha categoría, vistas de cerca; pero era precisamente a dicha distancia —a la sazón comparativamente cercana— como él intuía la común humanidad de Mme. de Vionnet. La mujer mejoraba, y ciertamente para consuelo del hombre, pero mejoraba como algo natural. Posiblemente hubiera motivos detrás, pero también habrían podido darse en Woollett. Sólo que si ella le manifestaba que quería simpatizar con él —según los motivos ocultos podrían alentar, plausiblemente—, sin duda habría sido más apasionante para él que ella se le hubiera revelado con extrañeza más acusada. ¡Ah, pues no era ni turca ni polaca! Lo que habría sido, ciertamente, categórico, una vez más, en el caso de la señora Newsome y de la señora Pocock. Mientras tanto, una señora y dos caballeros se habían acercado al banco y este incidente tuvo ulteriores consecuencias.

Los brillantes extraños se dirigieron entonces a su compañera; ésta se levantó para hablar con ellos y Strether advirtió que la escoltada dama, aunque madura y en modo alguno hermosa, tenía más arrogancia, elevado porte y amplias miras de lo que él, por decirlo de alguna manera, había planeado. Mme. de Vionnet la saludó llamándola «duquesa» y, a su vez, fue saludada, mientras la charla comenzaba en francés, con el apelativo de *«Ma toute-belle»;* pequeños detalles que tenían su oportuno y manifiesto interés para Strether. Mme. de Vionnet, sin embargo, no presentó al hombre, hecho que Strether interpretó como falso en la escala de Woollett y la humanidad de Woollett; aunque esto no evitó que la duquesa, que le pareció persona confianzuda y liberal, casi todo lo que él había supuesto, oscuramente, en una duquesa, le mirase tan directa y firmemente —pues firmeza *había*— como si le hubiera gustado, con todo, conocerle. «Oh, sí, querido, no hay duda, soy *yo;* ¿y quién eres *tú,* con esas arrugas tan interesantes y tus eficacísimas (¿las más bellas, las más feas?) narices?» —un suelto puñado de flores semejantes parecía ella, con no poca dulzura, arrojarle. Strether se preguntó —a tanta velocidad iba— si lo que determinaba la abstención de Mme. de

Vionnet sería alguna premonición de la influencia de cualquiera de los dos grupos. Como fuera, uno de los caballeros consiguió situarse en estrecha relación con la compañera de nuestro amigo; un caballero más bien robusto y no muy alto, con un sombrero de magnífica ala ancha y curvada, y una levita abotonada con efecto de superior decisión. Su francés había cambiado rápidamente a un inglés equitativo y se le ocurrió a Strether que podía tratarse muy bien de uno de los embajadores. Su designio era, a las claras, hacer valer una demanda al indiviso semblante de Mme. de Vionnet, objeto que logró en el transcurso de un minuto: se la llevó' con una triquiñuela de tres palabras; una triquiñuela jugada con un arte social de la que Strether, que miraba a los cuatro, cuyas espaldas se habían vuelto, alejarse, no se sentía dueño.

Volvió a hundirse en el banco y, mientras su mirada seguía al grupo, reflexionó, como había hecho antes, sobre las extrañas comunidades de Chad. Estuvo allí solo durante cinco minutos, totalmente pensativo; sobre todo con la sensación de haber sido repentinamente abandonado por una mujer encantadora y ocupada en aquel momento en otras sensaciones, y, por lo demás, del todo sabedora de sus actos e indiferente. Su capitulación, sin embargo, no había sido tan sosegada; no le importaba en absoluto que nadie más le dirigiese la palabra. Dada su actitud habría podido encontrarse en algo parecido a un desfile tan grande que la falta de ceremonia con que lo habían tratado habría podido ser casi un incidente menor de la procesión. Además, habría incidentes de sobra, según se dijo cuando su momento de contemplación fue interrumpido por la reaparición del pequeño Bilham, que de pronto se alzó ante él con un sugestivo. «¿Y bien?» en que se vio reflejado a sí mismo, confuso y posiblemente abatido. Replicó con un «¡Bien!» que quería dar a entender que no estaba abatido de ninguna de las maneras. Claro que no; dedujo, mientras el joven se sentaba a su lado, que si, en el peor de los casos, le habían hecho zozobrar en definitiva, le habían hecho zozobrar en el aire superior, el más sublime elemento con que tenía afinidad y en que confiaba flotar algún tiempo. No fue un descenso a la tierra decir, al cabo de un instante, a modo de continuada respuesta a la alusión:

—¿Está usted totalmente seguro de que su marido vive?

—Oh, sí, querido.

—¡Ah, entonces...!

—Ah, entonces, ¿qué?

Strether tenía, a fin de cuentas, que pensar.

—Bueno, lo siento por ellos.

Pero aquello, por el momento, no tenía mayor importancia. Aseguró al joven amigo que estaba muy contento. No habría alteración; estaban muy bien como estaban. No quería ser presentado; ya lo habían presentado más o menos cuanto quería. Había visto, además, una enormidad; le agradaba Gloriani, que, como la señorita Barrace seguía diciendo, era maravilloso; había descubierto, estaba seguro, a la otra media docena de hombres distinguidos, los artistas, los críticos y, oh, el gran dramaturgo: *éste* era fácil de reconocer; pero no quería —no, gracias, de veras— hablar con ninguno de ellos; pues no tenía nada en absoluto que decir y lo encontraba todo muy hermoso tal como estaba; muy hermoso porque lo que era... bueno, era sencillamente demasiado tarde. Y cuando, después de esto, el pequeño Bilham, sumiso y atento, aunque con el ojo puesto en los consuelos más a mano, emitió un desenvuelto «¡Más vale tarde que nunca!», lo único que obtuvo a cambio fue un brusco «¡Mejor a tiempo que a destiempo!» Este espíritu, ciertamente, acto seguido, fluyó para Strether en un calmo torrente demostrativo que, nada más emprender el vuelo, sintió era el verdadero consuelo. Había formado una fuente con plena conciencia, aunque el pantano se había llenado antes de lo previsto, y el detalle del compañero vino a desviar las aguas. Cosas había que tenían que suceder a tiempo si es que habían de suceder en definitiva. Pues si no se daban a tiempo se perdían para siempre. La sensación que le embargaba era que le habían arrastrado con su empuje largo y lento.

—No es demasiado tarde para *usted,* se mire por donde se mire, y no me parece que esté en peligro de perder el tren; aparte de que las personas suelen ser normalmente confiadas, por supuesto, con el reloj de su libertad marchando con tanto ruido que parece estar allí mismo, en no perder de vista el momento de subir. De todos modos no olvide que es usted joven, benditamente joven; regocíjese de ello, por el contrario, y viva con intensidad. Viva al máximo; es un error no hacerlo. No importa tanto lo que se haga en particular mientras se disponga de la propia vida. Si no se tiene esto, ¿qué se tiene entonces? Este lugar y las impresiones que suscita, por apacibles que pueda usted encontrarlas para agitar tanto a un hombre; todas mis impresiones acerca de Chad y de la gente que he visto en *su* casa... bueno, han tenido su pletórico mensaje para mí, sólo me han convencido de *eso.* Ahora lo veo claro. Apenas he hecho nada y ahora ya soy viejo; demasiado viejo, en cualquier caso, para lo que comprendo. Oh, sí, comprendo por fin; y más de lo que usted creería o pudiera expresar. Es demasiado tarde. Y es como si el tren me hubiera esperado pacientemente en la estación sin que yo haya tenido el sentido común de saber si estaba allí. Ahora oigo su silbido lejano y apagado a muchos kilómetros de distancia. Lo que se pierde se pierde; no se confunda

respecto de esto. El negocio, quiero decir el negocio de la vida, no habría podido ser, sin duda, diferente para mí; porque es, en el mejor de los casos, un molde de hojalata, o estriado y con relieves, con resaltos ornamentales, o bien liso y espantosamente plano, en que se vierte una masa desamparada, la propia conciencia, para que uno «coja» la forma, como dicen los cocineros, y quede más o menos compacta gracias a él: se vive, en fin, como se puede. Sin embargo, se tiene la ilusión de la libertad; en consecuencia, no se ha de vivir, me parece a mí, sin el recuerdo de esa ilusión. Yo he sido, en el momento preciso, o demasiado idiota o demasiado inteligente para tenerla; no sé muy bien qué. Naturalmente, en la actualidad, soy un caso de reacción contra el error; y la voz de la reacción no siempre debería escucharse. Lo que no afecta para nada al hecho de que tenga usted ahora la ocasión al alcance de la mano. El momento oportuno es cualquier momento que la suerte depare al hombre lo suficientemente afortunado para disponer de él. Y usted lo es mucho; he aquí lo extraordinario; es usted, me atrevería a decir, condenado sea, tan hermosa y detestablemente joven. En cualquier caso, no menosprecie a la estupidez. Por supuesto, no le tengo por un insensato, pues de lo contrario no me habría dirigido a usted con tanta solemnidad. Haga lo que le plazca mientras no cometa *mi* equivocación. Pues fue una equivocación. ¡Viva, viva usted!

...Así, con lentitud y amabilidad, entre pausas y parrafadas ininterrumpidas, Strether había acabado por confesarse; manteniendo al pequeño Bilham, frase tras frase, profunda y gravemente atento. Consecuencia de ello fue que el joven había puesto cara de circunstancias y que esto era precisamente lo contrario de la inocente alegría que el hombre que había hablado había querido estimular. Consideró un instante el resultado de sus palabras y entonces, posando la mano en la rodilla del hombre que escuchaba y como si fuera a poner punto final ni más ni menos que con una broma, dijo:

—De manera que le tendré bien vigilado.

—Oh, pero cuando yo tenga su edad no estoy seguro de que quiera ser muy distinto de usted.

—Ah —replicó Strether—, dispóngase mientras tanto a ser más divertido.

El pequeño Bilham reflexionó sobre aquello; finalmente, esbozó una sonrisa.

—Bueno, usted es divertido... para *mí*.

— *Impayable,* como dicen ustedes, sin duda. Pero ¿qué soy yo para mí mismo? —Strether se había levantado al decir esto y prestado atención a un encuentro que, en mitad del jardín, tenía lugar en aquel momento entre el anfitrión y la dama con quien Mme. de Vionnet le había abandonado. La dama en cuestión, que aparecía al poco de haber dejado a sus amigos, acogió la rápida llegada de Gloriani con unas palabras que Strether no alcanzó a oír, pero de las que su inteligente e interesante rostro parecieron darle un indicio. Estaba seguro de que se trataba de una mujer puntual y elegante, pero también de que había encontrado a su pareja, y no pudo por menos de complacerle —a la luz de lo que él creía que era la latente insolencia de la duquesa— el buen humor con que el gran artista hacía valer sus equivalentes recursos. ¿Pertenecerían los dos al «gran mundo»? ¿Y estaba él, por el momento, en virtud de esta observación que le vinculaba a la pareja, *en* dicho mundo? En tal caso había en el gran mundo un algo solapadamente selvático, un algo que percibióó en medio del césped, en aquel aire embriagador, como un soplo procedente de la jungla. Esto, sin embargo, hizo que sintiese la máxima admiración por los dos y una notable envidia por el elegante salvaje. Estas veleidades de un sentido común aturdido, frutos de la sugestión, maduradas sobre el terreno, quedaron reflejadas en las palabras que dirigió a continuación al pequeño Bilham:

—Ya que hablamos de ello, yo sé a quién me gustaría parecerme.

El pequeño Bilham siguió la mirada de Strether; pero hecho esto, como asaltado por un retazo de maliciosa sorpresa, dijo:

—¿A Gloriani?

A decir verdad, nuestro amigo ya había vacilado, aunque no respecto de la indicación de la duda del compañero, sí a propósito de lo que allí eran los penetrales del distingo crítico. Acababa de descubrir, en la ya saturada imagen, algo nuevo y a alguien más; otra impresión habíase superpuesto. Una joven con un vestido blanco y un sombrero claro de muelle plumaje había entrado de súbito en su campo visual y no tardó en estar claro que su trayectoria se dirigía hacia ellos. Lo que estuvo aún más claro fue que el agradable joven que estaba a su lado era Chad Newsome y lo que ya ribeteó la diafanidad fue que la joven era, por consiguiente, Mlle. de Vionnet, que era inconfundiblemente bonita —inteligente, educada, prudente, radiante, maravillosa— y que Chad, en aquel momento, con un avezado sentido del cálculo de los efectos, iba a presentarla al objeto visual de su viejo amigo. Lo que ribeteaba la diafanidad, la verdad sea dicha, era otra cosa bien distinta, algo ante cuya levísima insinuación —¿y no era por ventura una sencilla yuxtaposición?— toda vaguedad desaparecía. Fue el leve chasquido de un muelle: la comprensión de la verdad. Por entonces, su mirada también se había cruzado con la de Chad; ello no hizo sino corroborar lo anterior; y la verdad, en consecuencia, por lo que afectaba a la pregunta de Bilham, quedó patente en la respuesta.

—¡Oh, Chad! —pues era a aquel raro mozo a quien le habría gustado «parecerse». El virtuoso vínculo

estaba pues, al parecer, cabalmente, ante sus ojos; el virtuoso vínculo estaba, en tal caso, en trance de suplicar su bendición; Jeanne de Vionnet, aquella criatura encantadora, era por tanto —y ya con exquisitez e intensidad— el objeto de la misma. Chad la conducía derechamente hacia él y Chad era, oh naturalmente, en aquel momento —para gloria de Woollett o lo que fueremejor aún que Gloriani. Había arrancado aquella flor; la había tenido toda la noche en agua; y por último, al alzarla para comprobar los resultados, se regocijaba de su efecto. Por este motivo había intuido Strether al principio la presencia del cálculo: y el motivo, además, según supo entonces, por el que su forma de mirar a la joven sería, por lo que a Chad respectaba, una muestra del triunfo ulterior. ¿Qué joven habría exhibido de aquella manera, sin un motivo, a una doncella en flor? Y nada había de oscuro en sus motivos en la situación presente. La clase de la muchacha hablaba con suficiencia al respecto: no querían que fuera a Woollett. ¿Pobre Woollett y lo que podía perder? ¡Aunque extraordinario Chad, ciertamente, por otro lado, y lo que aquél podía ganar! El extraordinario Chad, sin embargo, se dirigía ya a él con toda magnificencia:

—Le presento a una buena amiga mía que lo sabe todo de usted y que además tiene un mensaje que entregarle. Querida, he aquí —ahora se había vuelto a la criatura— al mejor hombre del mundo, que puede hacer mucho por nosotros y al que quisiera que apreciases y respetases tanto como yo.

Allí estaba ella, más bien arrebolada, con un poco de miedo, bonita como ella sola y en modo alguno parecida a su madre. Respecto de esto último no había más semejanza que la que se da entre dos jóvenes; aquí radicó, a decir verdad, la más fuerte y súbita impresión de Strether. Aturdido, confuso, intrigado, evocó a la mujer con que había hablado hacía nada; fue una revelación a cuya luz vino a entender que la dama no haría sino aumentar su faceta interesante. Tan hermosa, tan lozana, tan esbelta, había hecho mucho por esta perfección; de modo que, pues creía tales cosas de ella, pues la veía en tan elevado estado maternal, la comparación se había espoleado a sí propia. ¿Qué había quedado sino aceptarla con toda naturalidad?

—Mamá quiere que le diga antes de que nos vayamos —dijo la joven— que espera muy gustosa su pronta visita. Tiene algo especial que decirle.

—Se siente culpable —explicó Chad con toda solicitudde haberle interrumpido accidentalmente cuando tanto gozaba de su compañía de usted.

—Oh, por favor —murmuró Strether, mirando con amabilidad a uno y otro, asombrado de todo.

—Por mi parte quiero preguntarle —continuó Jeanne con las manos unidas, como en una breve oración aprendida—, quiero preguntarle si va a venir de veras.

—Permíteme, querida... ¡Yo me ocuparé de ello! —afirmó Chad genialmente en respuesta a aquello, mientras Strether casi contenía la respiración. La muchacha tenía un no sé qué de excesivamente suave, un algo demasiado desconocido para el trato directo; no quedaba más remedio que mirar esto como se mira un cuadro, con el ánimo en suspenso. Pero con Chad estaba en su propio terreno: con Chad podía tratar; tan complaciente confianza en aquello y en todo irradiaba el joven. Había todo un mundo en el tono que empleaba con su compañera, pues hablaba, efectivamente, como si ya fuera de la familia. Esto hizo que Strether se pusiese a conjeturar qué sería aquello tan «especial» de Mme. de Vionnet. En su encuentro de minutos atrás ella le había encontrado franco y sencillo y sin duda quería discutir con él la manera de enfocar el asunto de los jóvenes, una manera que no estableciese como condición la emigración de su hija. Ya se imaginaba hablando con la dama de los atractivos de Woollett como domicilio de la amiga de Chad. ¿Iría ahora el joven a confiarle aquello a la mujer, de tal modo que, a fin de cuentas, no resultara ser sino una de aquellas «amigas» que el embajador de su madre había de verse obligado a tratar? Fue como si durante un instante los dos hombres se observasen a propósito de este punto. Pero no había ninguna equivocación en el postrer orgullo de Chad al hacer alarde de la relación. Era esto lo que le había hecho enderezarse cuando, tres minutos antes, había aparecido ante sus ojos; lo que había hecho que su amigo, nada más verle, hubiera adoptado un aire tan chocante. En una palabra, había sido al advertir que Chad le estaba ahorrando el esfuerzo directo cuando más le había envidiado, según había dicho al pequeño Bilham. Todo el espectáculo, sin embargo, no había durado más de tres o cuatro minutos y el responsable del mismo no tardó en explicar que, como Mme. de Vionnet seguiría «adelante» sin demora, ello no podía por menos de significar el secuestro de Jeanne. Pronto volverían a verse todos y Strether había de quedarse mientras tanto-y distraerse solo:

—Ya hablaremos detenidamente del asunto.

Se llevó a la joven como la había traído y Strether, con la ligera y dulce cualidad extranjera del *«Au revoir monsieur!»* femenino en el oído como un elemento inaudito, los vio alejarse hombro con hombro e intuyó que, una vez más, la relación que el joven tenía con ella adquiría un asomo del mismo. Desaparecieron entre los demás y, al parecer, dentro de la casa; con lo que nuestro amigo se volvió para expresar al pequeño Bilham las convicciones de que estaba saturado. Pero no había ni rastro del aludido; el pequeño Bilham, en un abrir y cerrar de ojos y por razones que él sabría, se había alejado: circunstancia por

la que, en su relatividad, Strether se sintió vivamente afectado.

III

Chad no iba, en aquella ocasión, a cumplir su promesa de volver; pero la señorita Gostrey no había tardado en presentarse con una explicación de la incorrección masculina. Al final, había habido ciertos motivos para haberse marchado con *ces dames;* y el joven le había pedido que, con mucha diligencia, fuera a atender al amigo común. Cosa que la mujer había hecho, según comprobó Strether mientras ella se ponía a su lado, de una manera que no dejaba nada que desear. Strether se había sentado en el banco, otra vez solo durante un rato, y sumamente consciente, a pesar de la deserción del pequeño Bilham, de sus pensamientos mudos, a propósito de los cuales, sin embargo, la nueva interlocutra fue un recipiente aún más capacitado.

—¡Es la hija! —había exclamado casi en el momento de aparecer ella; y aunque la respuesta directa de la mujer se retrasó un tanto, el hombre pudo advertir en la demora femenina el efecto de tamaña verdad. Tal vez fuera, sencillamente, mientras ella esperaba, que ambos estuvieran ya en presencia de una verdad que se dilataba como una riada, inapta, por el momento, para serle ofrecida a la mujer en una simple copa; pues ¿quién se atrevía a demostrar que *ces dames* no eran sino personas acerca de las cuales —una vez que se las había tenido delante— ella podía haberle dicho al hombre casi todo desde el principio? Detalle que habría salido a la luz libremente si él hubiera tomado la simple precaución de decir sus nombres a la mujer. No habría habido mejor ejemplo —y ella pareció notarlo con gran diversión de su parte— que la forma en que el hombre, por fin, al revelar las cosas por su cuenta y riesgo, arrojaba las precauciones por la borda. Pues ellas eran ni más ni menos, ella y la madre de la joven, que viejas compañeras de estudios, compañeras que apenas si se habían visto en el transcurso de los años, pero a quienes un azar inesperado había reunido de pronto. Era un consuelo, insinuó la señorita Gostrey, comprobar que ya no tendría que andarse con tiento: no estaba acostumbrada al tanteo y él, en términos generales, no había carecido de datos para dar con el sentido de las indirectas femeninas. Con la que en aquel momento tenía ella en las manos no había necesidad, por fin, de perderse en cavilaciones.

—Va a venir a verme... a propósito de usted-prosiguió la interlocutora de Strether—; pero no necesito saber dónde estoy.

No había necesidad de perderse en cavilaciones, pero Strether, cosa muy suya, estaba todavía indeciso.

—¿Quiere decir con eso que usted sabe dónde está *ella?* La mujer apenas vaciló.

—Quiero decir que si ella viene a verme, ahora que ya me he repuesto un poco de la conmoción, yo no estaré en casa. Strether no recuperó la serenidad.

—¿Le conmocionó el reconocerla?

La mujer dio una de sus raras muestras de impaciencia.

—Fue una sorpresa... el hecho me emocionó. No sea tan literal. Pero me lavo las manos respecto de ella.

La cara del pobre Strether se ensombreció.

—¿Es una mujer imposible...?

—Es más encantadora si cabe de lo que recordaba.

—¿Dónde está el meollo entonces?

La mujer tuvo que pensar la manera de decirlo.

—Bueno, *yo soy* la imposible. Porque es imposible. Todo es imposible.

El hombre la miró durante unos momentos.

—Ya veo adónde quiere ir a parar. Todo es posible. —La mirada de ambos se encontró entonces y así se mantuvo unos instantes, tras los que el hombre prosiguió—: ¿No lo es la hermosa hija? —Luego, como ella no dijera nada—: ¿Por qué no quiere recibirla?

La respuesta femenina sonó con claridad inmediatamente:

—Porque quiero mantenerme al margen de esto.

Cosa que despertó en el hombre una breve queja.

—¿Va usted a abandonarme *ahora?*

—No, sólo voy a abandonarla a ella. Ella querrá que yo la ayude respecto de usted. Y yo no quiero.

—¿Sólo me ayudaría a mí respecto de ella? ¡Pero, entonces...!

Casi todos los reunidos habían, atraídos por el té, pasado al interior de la casa y los dos amigos tenían el jardín casi a su entera disposición. Las sombras se habían alargado, el último piar de los pájaros que habían anidado en el noble barrio, pródigo en espacios libres, sonaba en los elevados árboles de los demás jardines también, en el del antiguo convento y en los de los viejos *hôtels;* era como si nuestros amigos

hubieran esperado aquella manifestación del asombro absoluto. Las impresiones de Strether estaban todavía presentes; era como si hubiera ocurrido algo que les había «clavado», vuéltoles más profundos; el hombre no tardaría en preguntarse poco después, aquella misma noche, qué había ocurrido en realidad, consciente hasta donde sabía de que, al fin y al cabo, para un caballero que entra por vez primera en el «gran» mundo, el mundo de los embajadores y las duquesas, los sumandos arrojaban una magra suma. No le venía de nuevas, sin embargo, como ya sabemos, que un hombre —en última instancia, un hombre como *él*— puede tener un volumen de experiencia en proporción con sus aventuras; de modo que, aunque era indudable que no era ninguna gran aventura estar allí con la señorita Gostrey y oyendo hablar de Mme. de Vionnet, la hora, el paisaje, lo inmediato, lo reciente, lo posible —así como la comunicación misma, ninguna de cuyas facetas estaba falta de consecuencias— no hacían sino dar a aquellos momentos un poco más de sabor histórico.

Histórico y conocido era, para empezar, que la madre de Jeanne había sido, veintitrés años antes y en Ginebra, compañera de estudios y buena amiga de María Gostrey, quien, además, desde entonces, aunque intermitentemente, había gozado de su compañía, intermitencia a la que había que añadir la prolongada y reciente dosis. Veintitrés años pesaban sobre ambas, sin duda; y Mme. de Vionnet, aunque se había casado nada más dejar los estudios, no podía tener en la actualidad menos de treinta y ocho. Esto la hacía diez años mayor que Chad, aunque diez años más, por otro lado, si Strether convenía en ello, de lo que la mujer aparentaba; lo último, en cualquier caso, que se habría esperado de una suegra en ciernes. Sería la más encantadora de todas las suegras; a menos, naturalmente, en virtud de una perversidad por el momento insospechable, que la mujer rehusase el parentesco. Nada había, ni que decir tiene, en que, por lo que María recordaba de ella, no tuviera que ser una dama encantadora; y esto, francamente, a pesar del estigma del fracaso en el parentesco en que más suele darse dicho fracaso. No había habido el menor indicio —¿cómo, a decir verdad, habría podido haberlo?— de que M. de Vionnet hubiera sido un patán. La mujer llevaba años separada de él, lo que, naturalmente, siempre era una situación incómoda; pero la impresión de la señorita Gostrey al respecto era que difícilmente habría obtenido la mujer mejores resultados de haber manifestado a propósito que era persona simpática. Pues era tan cordial que nadie había tenido nada que decir, lo que, por fortuna, no podía aplicarse al marido. Este era tan imposible que ella le llevaba la ventaja de todos sus méritos.

No menos historia fue para Strether que el conde de Vionnet —ya que también era historia que la dama en cuestión era condesa— viniera a representarse ante sus ojos, de la inclemente mano de la señorita Gostrey, como un réprobo superior, distinguido, educado e impertinente, producto de un orden misterioso; además, era historia conocida que la encantadora muchacha, caracterizada con tanta franqueza por su compañera, se había visto casada, de manera inoportuna, por una madre, personaje perfilado con no menor delicadeza, atribulada por sombríos motivos personales; quizá lo más histórico de todo aquello fuera que el grupo, de hecho, estaba bajo el influjo de tales consideraciones que ni siquiera se había planteado el divorcio.

— *Ces gens-là* no se divorcian, bien lo sabe usted, del mismo modo que no emigran ni renuncian: estiman estas cosas impías y vulgares.

Detalle a cuya luz parecía tratarse de una gente enjundiosamente especial. Todo era especial; todo era, en la imaginación de Strether, más o menos enjundioso. La muchacha de la escuela ginebrina, criatura solitaria, interesante, atractiva, tanto sensible, pues, como violenta, audaz aunque siempre perdonada, era hija de padre francés y una madre inglesa que, prematuramente viuda, había vuelto a casarse, había vuelto a probar fortuna con un extranjero; en cuya vida con el cual no había dado, al parecer, a su hija ningún ejemplo de comodidad. Se trataba de individuos —los de la parte de la madre inglesa— de condición más o menos descollante; y sin embargo con unas rarezas y disparidades que a menudo habían hecho que María, cuando pensaba en ellos de tarde en tarde, se preguntase dónde encajaban. Era su opinión, en cualquier caso, que la madre, interesada e inclinada a la aventura, había actuado sin miramiento, pensando sólo en deshacerse cuanto antes de un estorbo posible, de un estorbo real. El padre, según sus impresiones, francés, un nombre que «imponía», había sido un caso distinto, pues había dejado a su hija, ella lo recordaba con toda claridad, un recuerdo lleno de ternura, así como una pequeña pero respetable fortuna que, por desgracia, había de convertirla más tarde en una presa más o menos codiciada. En el colegio había descollado por su sorprendente inteligencia, aunque ésta no había sido en modo alguno libresca; políglota como una chica judía (cosa que no era, ¡de ningún modo!), chapurreaba el francés, el inglés, el alemán, el italiano y cuanto se le antojara, de una forma que la hacía merecedora, si no de premios y diplomas, por lo menos sí de todos los «papeles», memorizados o improvisados, del encortinado y disfrazado teatro del colegio, y, en especial, de todos los misterios de la raza y la imprecisión ancestral, de toda jactancia acerca de «casa», entre sus variopintas compañeras.

Sin duda sería difícil en la actualidad, como ocurría entre franceses e ingleses, etiquetarla y situarla;

seguramente se mostraría ella, respecto del conocimiento, al sentir de la señorita Gostrey, como uno de esos especímenes prácticos que no se andan con explicaciones: intelectos con puertas tan numerosas como la poliglota red de confesionarios de San Pedro. Con ella podía uno confesarse con toda confianza en rumeliota, incluso pecados rumeliotas. ¡Por lo tanto...! Pero la narradora de Strether ahogó las implicaciones de esto último con una carcajada; una carcajada con que el descubrimiento masculino de un elemento fuerte en el cuadro de los hechos quedó además, acaso, suficientemente protegido. Strether reflexionó un momento, mientras su amiga proseguía, sobre los pecados que podían ser particularmente rumeliotas. La mujer prosiguió, en cualquier caso, para mencionar su encuentro con la joven personita —otra vez junto a un lago suizo— durante su primera etapa marital, que durante los pocos años intermedios no había sido al parecer perturbada por ninguna violencia. Había estado encantada en aquella ocasión, muy complaciente con *ella,* pletórica de emociones abnegadas, de reconocimientos divertidos y de divertidos recuerdos; y luego otra vez, mucho después, tras un largo intervalo, con el mismo pero diferente encanto, conmovedor y más bien desconcertante para los cinco minutos de un encuentro en una estación de ferrocarril *en province,* en cuyo curso había salido a relucir que su vida había cambiado del todo. La señorita Gostrey había comprendido lo suficiente para saber, en esencia, lo que había ocurrido y sin embargo había fantaseado bonitamente que estaba impecable. Sin duda había honduras en ella, pero estaba muy bien; ya vería Strether si no era cierto. Era una persona diferente, sin embargo —y prematuramente marcada— de la pequeña criatura natural del colegio de Ginebra; una personita rehecha —como ocurría con las extranjeras, a diferencia de las norteamericanas— por el matrimonio. Su situación, además, saltaba a la vista, se había aclarado del todo; sin duda había habido —estaba dentro de lo posible— una separación judicial. Se había instalado en París, había llevado consigo a su hija y gobernaba sola el bajel de su vida. No era un bajel muy agradable, sobre todo allí, para estar en él; pero Marie de Vionnet salió adelante. Hizo amigos, naturalmente, y muy buenos. En cualquier caso, allí estaba ella, dato muy interesante. Su conocimiento del señor Chad en modo alguno demostraba que no los tenía; venía a demostrar en cambio qué buenos amigos tenía *él.*

—Me di cuenta —dijo la señorita Gostrey— aquella noche en el Français; lo comprendí en menos de tres minutos. Advertí su presencia... o de alguien parecido a ella. Y lo mismo —añadió la mujer en el acto— le ocurrió a usted.

—Oh, no; de nadie parecido a ella-dijo Strether riendoPero, ¿se refiere usted —dijo a continuación— a la influencia que ha tenido sobre él?

La señorita Gostrey se había puesto en pie; era hora de irse.

—Ella lo ha traído por su hija.

Sus ojos, como ya había ocurrido a menudo a lo largo de la inocente conferencia, se encontraron durante un buen rato a través de los lentes respectivos; momento tras el que Strether volvió a pasear la mirada por el lugar en que se encontraban. Estaban completamente solos.

—¿No debió ella, entonces, haber ido un poco más aprisa?

—Ah, esté seguro de que no perdió ni un momento. Pero allí estaba la buena madre: la buena francesa. Debe usted recordar esto de dicha mujer: que, en tanto que madre, es francesa; y eso, para ellos, es una bendición especial. Lo que ocurrió, sin duda, es que no pudo comenzar tan pronto como habría querido: esto hace que sea agradecida con las ayudas prestadas.

Strether meditó aquello mientras se dirigían hacia la casa, en trance ya de partir.

—En tal caso, ¿ella cuenta conmigo para solucionar las cosas?

—Sí, cuenta con usted. Oh, y en primerísimo lugar, por supuesto —añadió la señorita Gostrey—, consigo misma... bueno, para convencerle a usted.

—Ah —replicó su amigo—, ¡ha cazado joven a Chad!

—Sí, pero hay mujeres que sirven para todas las edades. Es la especie más maravillosa.

La mujer se había echado a reír mientras pronunciaba aquellas palabras, pero éstas hicieron detenerse al compañero en el acto.

—¿Quiere usted decir que intentará embaucarme?

—Bueno, el caso es que me pregunto, en cuanto tenga una oportunidad, qué es lo que *hará.*

—¿Qué es —preguntó Strether— para usted una oportunidad? ¿Una visita mía?

—Ah, debe usted ir a verla. —La señorita Gostrey estaba un poquitín evasiva—. No debe usted soslayarlo. Usted habría ido a ver a la otra mujer. Quiero decir, en caso de que hubiera habido una... de especie diferente. Para eso vino usted.

Era una posibilidad; pero Strether quiso hacer distinciones.

—Yo no vine a ver a *esta* especie.

La mujer ya había depositado sobre él una mirada maravillosa.

—¿Le desilusiona que no sea peor?

El hombre acarició largamente la pregunta y, acto seguido, procuró dar la respuesta más honrada.

—Sí. Si fuera peor las cosas serían más fáciles para nuestros fines. Todo sería más sencillo.

—Es posible —admitió ella—. Pero ¿no hace esto las cosas más agradables?

—Ah, usted sabe —replicó el hombre inmediatamente— que yo no vine... por lo agradable: ¿acaso no era esto lo que usted me reprochaba al principio?

—Ni más ni menos. En consecuencia, vuelvo a decirle lo que le dije al comienzo. Debe usted tomar las cosas como vengan. Además —añadió la señorita Gostrey—, no temo por mí.

—¿Por usted...?

—De que usted la vea. Confío en ella. No le dirá nada de mí. De hecho no hay nada que *pueda* decir.

Strether quedó asombrado... pero sólo durante el breve momento en que pensó en aquello. Acto seguido, exclamó:

—¡Oh, mujeres!

Hubo algo en estas palabras que hicieron ruborizar a la mujer.

—Sí, es la verdad. Somos abismos. —Pero acabó por sonreír—. Pero me atrevo con ella.

El hombre sufrió una sacudida.

—Bueno, en tal caso, ¡yo también! —Aunque añadió, en el momento de entrar en la casa, que lo primero que haría por la mañana sería ver a Chad.

Fue esto, al día siguiente, lo más sencillo que ocurrió al joven, incluso antes de que bajara, en su propio hotel. Strether tomaba el café, por costumbre, en el salón; pero al bajar para este fin, Chad propuso en el acto un aplazamiento en beneficio de lo que él llamó mayor intimidad. Tampoco él, todavía, había tomado nada: se sentarían juntos en cualquier parte; y cuando, tras un corto paseo por la avenida, tomaron asiento, para una mayor intimidad, entre otras veinte personas, nuestro amigo vio en el gesto del compañero cierto miedo a la aparición de Waymarsh. Era la primera vez que Chad eludía a este personaje de aquella manera; y Strether se preguntó de qué sería síntoma. Descubrió en seguida que el joven se tomaba muy en serio que el hombre aún no le hubiera visto; lo que, a su vez, arrojó brevísima luz, tal vez un tanto sorprendente, sobre lo que ambos, hasta el momento presente, habían considerado seriedad. Era sobradamente halagüeño, sin embargo, que el meollo de la cuestión —si es que en *aquello* consistía el meollo de la cuestión— estuviera determinado, según parecía, por el incremento de la importancia de Strether. Pues esto fue lo que, con notable rapidez, acabó por plantearse: que Chad, tras levantarse con las gallinas, hubiera corrido para hacerle saber, mientras su conciencia matutina estaba fresca todavía, que había sufrido, al pie de la letra, durante la tarde precedente, una impresión tremenda. Mme. de Vionnet no descansaría, no podría descansar mientras él no le asegurase que *consentía* en verla otra vez. La proposición se hizo, por encima de la mesa de tablero de mármol, mientras la espuma de la leche caliente se formaba en la taza respectiva y acababa por congelarse en el aire, y con la sonrisa de la más pulcra urbanidad de Chad; fue la expresión del rostro de éste lo que hizo que las dudas de su amigo confluyesen, en el acto, en un estímulo verbal.

—Escucha —y nada más; fue lo único que, por el momento, alcanzó a decir—: Escucha.

Chad escuchaba con toda su inteligencia despierta, mientras Strether volvía a recordar la imagen que le había producido su primera impresión de él: el joven pagano feliz, hermoso y difícil, pero comprensivo, cuya misteriosa medida, bajo el farol callejero, había querido calcular mentalmente. El joven pagano, tras un prolongado cruce de miradas, comprendía con suficiencia. Strether apenas tenía necesidad de decir el resto:

—Quiero saber cuál es mi lugar. —Pero no sólo lo dijo, sino que añadió algo más antes de recibir ninguna respuesta—: ¿Te has comprometido a casarte con la damita? ¿Es ése tu secreto?

Chad negó con la cabeza con la parsimoniosa amenidad que constituía una de sus formas de decir que había tiempo para todo.

—No tengo ningún secreto... ¡aunque podría tenerlos! Ese, por lo menos, no lo tengo. No estamos comprometidos. No.

—¿Cuál es, entonces, el problema?

—¿Se refiere usted al motivo por el que todavía no me he ido con usted? —Chad, que comenzaba el desayuno poniendo mantequilla al suizo estaba completamente preparado para explicarse—. Nada me habría inducido, y nada me inducirá, a no retenerle mientras usted se quedase con gusto. Salta a la vista que le sienta extraordinariamente. —Strether tenía muchas cosas que decir al respecto, pero por otro lado era divertido mensurar el paso del tono de Chad. Nunca había estado tan mundano y en su compañía nuestro amigo tenía siempre presente que estaba viendo, a lo largo de las sucesivas relaciones, cómo se comportaba un hombre de mundo. Chad lo hacía con gran belleza—. Mi idea, *voyons!,* es sencillamente que usted deje que Mme. de Vionnet le conozca, sencillamente que usted consienta en conocerla. No me importa decirle que, en última instancia, siendo como es mujer inteligente y encantadora, tengo más confianza con ella. Lo único que pido a usted es que permita que ella le hable. Me ha preguntado hace nada por lo que

usted llama mi problema y, en la medida en que éste existe, no le quepa duda de que ella se lo explicará. Sólo ella es mi problema, diablo, si es que en realidad se puede tener alguno. Pero hasta cierto punto —se apresuró a añadir de la manera más maravillosa—, eso tendrá que descubrirlo usted por sí solo. Es muy buena amiga, maldita sea. Demasiado buena para que yo la deje sin... sin... —Esta fue su primera vacilación.

—¿Sin qué?

—Bueno, sin reparar de un modo u otro los perjudiciales efectos de mi sacrificio.

—¿Sería pues un sacrificio?

—Sería la mayor pérdida que yo podría sufrir. Le debo tanto.

Era muy hermosa la forma en que Chad decía aquellas cosas y su súplica era ya manifiestamente —oh, y de manera totalmente inmediata y pública— interesante. A decir verdad, el momento se intensificaba para Strether. ¿Tanto debía Chad a Mme. de Vionnet? ¿Qué hacía esto, pues, sino aclarar todo el misterio? Chad tenía deudas a causa de sus desajustes y la mujer estaba en situación de extenderle la factura de los gastos invertidos en la restauración. ¿A qué otra conclusión, en el fondo, se habría podido llegar? A ella había llegado Strether, allí sentado, mientras comía la tostada y daba cuenta de su segunda taza. Hacer aquello, con la ayuda de la expresión seria y agradable de Chad, era hacer algo más, asimismo. En efecto, nunca había estado tan dispuesto a aceptarle tal como era. ¿Era esto lo que con tanta prontitud se había aclarado? Era cuestión de carácter, sin duda, esto es, del carácter de todos, salvo, en cierto modo, del suyo. A Strether le pareció que su carácter recibía, en aquel momento, la lacra de todos los errores que había sospechado o creído. La persona a quien Chad decía que pudiera sin ambages aturdir el sosiego de otros quedaba muy por encima de toda sospecha en virtud de la naturaleza de su obra y la tranquila lucidez del joven. Todo lo cual era tan patente que se podía meditar con rapidez; aunque, la verdad sea dicha, Strether, en plena meditación, alcanzó a formular una pregunta.

—¿Me das tu palabra de que si yo capitulo ante Mme. de Vionnet tú capitularás ante *mí?*

Chad puso la mano con firmeza sobre la de su amigo.

—Querido amigo, se la doy a usted.

Al final hubo algo en su felicidad que se le antojó un tanto embarazoso y opresivo; Strether comenzaba ya, bajo sus efectos, a suspirar por el aire libre y la posición erguida. Había hecho un gesto al camarero, indicando que solicitaba la nota y la transacción necesitó unos momentos, en cuyo curso intuyó de manera absoluta, mientras sacaba el dinero y fingía —con notoria superficialidad— calcular el cambio, que el espíritu superior de Chad, su juventud, su experiencia, su paganismo, su felicidad, su seguridad, su imprudencia, lo que fuese, se habían marcado un tanto a su favor conscientemente. Bueno, su utilidad tuvo aquello; por lo pronto ocultaron[7] a nuestro amigo como si se tratase de un velo por el que —como si estuviera embozado— oía que su interlocutor le preguntaba si no podría llevarle al otro lado alrededor de las cinco. «Al otro lado» era al otro lado del río, y al otro lado del río era donde vivía Mme. de Vionnet, y las cinco en cuestión eran las cinco de aquella misma tarde. Por último salieron del local, es decir, salieron antes de que él respondiese. En la calle encendió un cigarrillo, que le dio un poco más de tiempo. Pero sabía ya con precisión que toda demora era inútil.

—¿Qué tiene pensado ella respecto a mí? —vino a preguntar entonces.

Chad no recurrió a dilación alguna.

—¿Le tiene usted miedo?

—Oh, de qué manera. ¿Acaso no se nota?

—Bueno —dijo Chad—, no le hará nada peor de lo que usted le haga a ella.

—Eso es precisamente lo que me atemoriza.

—Pero esa actitud no es honrada respecto de mí.

Strether vaciló.

—Es honrada respecto de tu madre.

—Oh —dijo Chad—, ¿también a *ella* le tiene miedo?

—Poco menos. Quizá incluso más. No obstante —añadió Strether—, ¿se opone esta dama a tus intereses patrios?

—Está claro que no directamente; pero está muy a favor de los de aquí.

—¿Y cuáles estima que son «aquí»?

—Vaya, ¡las buenas relaciones![8]

—¿Y cuáles son tus buenas relaciones?

—Eso es ni más ni menos lo que descubrirá usted si acude, tal como le estoy pidiendo, a verla.

Strether le miró con un poco de la parquedad, sin duda, que la perspectiva de haber algo más que «descubrir» apenas contribuía a promover.

—¿Tan buenas son?

—Oh, apabullantemente buenas.

Strether había vuelto a titubear, pero no duró mucho. Todo estaba muy bien, pero ya no había nada que arriesgar.

—Disculpa, pero en realidad debo, como te dije al principio, saber en qué lugar estoy. ¿Es una mala mujer?

—¿Mala? —repitió Chad, aunque sin impresionarse¿Es eso lo que se piensa?

—¿Cuando las relaciones son buenas? —Strether se sentía un tanto estúpido, incluso le pareció que lanzaba una risa insensata, por haberse impuesto aquella conducta. A decir verdad, ¿de qué estaba hablando? Su mirada se había tranquilizado; en aquel momento se posaba en todas partes. Pero había algo sobre lo que quería volver, aunque no sabía cómo hacerlo. Los dos o tres expedientes en que pensaba, y uno de ellos en particular, eran, incluso escrúpulos aparte, demasiado desagradables. Por fin, sin embargo, dio con algo:

—¿Hay alguna cosa en su pasado que pueda reprochársele?

Lo que se le antojó, con la inmediatez con que lo había pensado, tan grandilocuente como gazmoño; tanto que dio las gracias a Chad por tomarlo con el humor preciso. El joven se puso a hablar con tanta generosidad que el efecto fue prácticamente de una limpidez intachable.

—Nada en absoluto. Es un pasado lleno de belleza. *Allez donc voir!* -Estas últimas palabras fueron, con la liberalidad de la confianza que irradiaban, tan imperiosas que Strether ni siquiera tuvo que aprobarlas; pero antes de que ambos hombres se separasen quedó confirmado que se recogería al último a las cinco menos cuarto.

Libro sexto

I

Eran las cinco y media pasadas —los dos hombres no llevaban más de quince minutos en el salón de Mme. de Vionnet— cuando Chad, con una mirada al reloj y otra a su anfitriona, dijo con gran ocurrencia y alegría:

—Tengo un compromiso y sé que no le disgustará que le deje con usted. No tardará en despertarle un gran interés; y en cuanto a ella-dijo, dirigiéndose a Strether—, le aseguro, por si está intranquilo, que está totalmente a salvo.

Les había dejado, turbados o no por aquella última advertencia, según el buen hacer de cada cual, aunque la turbación era algo de lo que Strether no estuvo seguro al principio que Mme. de Vionnet estuviese libre. Para su sorpresa, él sí se había liberado de ella; pero por entonces ya se había acostumbrado a considerarse un cínico. Ocupaba ella, la anfitriona, en la Rue de Bellechasse, el primer piso de una casa antigua a la que nuestros visitantes habían tenido acceso por un patio viejo y limpio. El patio era amplio y despejado, lleno de revelaciones, para nuestro amigo, de la costumbre de la intimidad, la paz de los intervalos, la dignidad de las distancias y las entradas; la casa, para sus inquietos sentidos, pertenecía al muy doméstico estilo de los antiguos días y el viejo París que siempre buscaba —unas veces intensamente sentido, otras más profundamente añorado— estaba en el barniz inmemorial de la ancha escalera encerada y en las elegantes *boiseries, los* medallones, las molduras, los espejos, los grandes espacios despejados del salón blanco y grisáceo en que había sido presentado. Le pareció verla al principio en medio de propiedades no ordinariamente numerosas, sino con el matiz de lo heredado, tratadas con esmero, encantadoras. Mientras sus ojos, al cabo de un rato, se apartaban de los de su anfitriona y Chad hablaba con soltura —no en última instancia de *él,* sino de otras personas, personas que no conocía, pero que mencionaba como si las conociera— se sorprendió descubriendo, a modo de paisaje de la mujer, cierta gloria, cierta prosperidad propia del primer imperio, cierto hechizo napoleónico, cierto esplendor ya amortiguado de la gran leyenda; elementos identificables todavía en las sillas consulares, en los engastes mitológicos, las cabezas de esfinge y las gastadas superficies del raso que alternaba con la seda.

El lugar en sí mismo iba más allá, según conjeturó, y de qué manera continuaba allí el viejo París, hasta el punto de reproducirse; pero el período postrevolucionario, el mundo que vagamente consideraba mundo de Chateaubriand, de Mme. de Staël, del joven Lamartine, había dejado su huella de arpas, urnas y lámparas, una huella impresa en los diversos objetos, ornamentos y reliquias pequeñas. Por lo que sabía, nunca había estado en presencia de reliquias, de ninguna dignidad especial, de un orden privado: miniaturas, medallones, pinturas, libros viejos; libros encuadernados en piel, rosados y verdosos, con

guirnaldas doradas en el lomo, alineados, junto con otras ambiguas pertenencias, tras el cristal de los plúteos ribeteados de latón. Su atención se posó en ellos con toda ternura. Estaban entre los artículos que diferenciaban con gran notoriedad el piso de Mme. de Vionnet del pequeño museo de gangas de la señorita Gostrey y de la encantadora casa de Chad; le pareció que se basaba más en antiguas acumulaciones reducidas, posiblemente, de vez en vez, que en cualquier método de adquisición o forma de curiosidad contemporáneos. Chad y la señorita Gostrey habían revuelto, comprado, cogido y cambiado examinando, seleccionando, comparando; mientras que la dama del escenario que se abría ante él, venustamente pasiva bajo el sortilegio de la transmisión —transmisión por lado paterno, añadió con la más absoluta de las invenciones—, se había limitado a recibir, a aceptar y a mantenerse impávida. Y cuando no se había mantenido impávida era, en el mejor de los casos, porque se había sentido movida a alguna oscura caridad por una fortuna en quiebra. Habría habido objetos que ella o sus antepasados tal vez, presumiblemente, en alguna ocasión, habrían cedido por necesidad; pues Strether no podía ni sospechar que hubieran vendido las piezas antiguas para comprar otras «mejores». No habrían experimentado ninguna diferencia en cuanto a lo mejor o lo peor. El hombre sólo alcanzaba a imaginar que habían estado sometidos —tal vez en la emigración o en el exilio, pues el bosquejo masculino era esquemático y confuso— al apremio de la necesidad o la obligación del sacrificio.

El apremio de la necesidad —fuera cual fuese el papel del otro imperativo— no estaba, sin embargo, actualmente en activo, por lo que podía deducirse, ya que los indicios de una holgura escarmentada, a fin de cuentas, abundaban todavía, señales múltiples de un gusto cuyo criterio tal vez habría podido llamarse excéntrico. Adivinaba preferencias escuetas e intensas y escasas exclusiones tajantes, una profunda suspicacia respecto de lo vulgar y un punto de vista muy personal respecto de lo apropiado. El resultado global de aquel proceso era algo para lo que no tenía un nombre, en aquel momento, que encajase bien, pero se habría acercado mucho a la denominación si hubiera aludido a ello alegando se trataba del aire de la respetabilidad suprema, la conciencia, parca, tranquila, reservada, y sin embargo distinta y difusa, del honor privado. El aire de la respetabilidad suprema: extraña pared en blanco contra la que su aventura le había llevado a romperse las narices. A decir verdad, según lo iba pensando en aquel momento, había estado en todas las entradas, cernídose sobre el patio mientras él lo cruzaba, campado por las escaleras mientras subía, sonado en el austero vibrar de la vieja campanilla de cuya antigua pero impecable borla había tirado Chad en la puerta; conformaba, en pocas palabras, el más clárido medio de su particular naturaleza que había aspirado nunca. Habría respondido al respecto al cabo de un cuarto de hora que algunas de las vitrinas contenían espadas y charreteras de coroneles y generales de antaño; medallas e insignias prendidas otrora de corazones que hacía mucho que habían dejado de latir; tabaqueras donadas a ministros y enviados; ejemplares de obras, con dedicatoria, regaladas por autores ya clásicos. Y en el fondo de todo, a su juicio, el sentido de su rara desemejanza con las mujeres que había conocido. Este sentido había fomentado, desde la víspera, lo que más recordaba de ella y se había visto, por encima de todo, singularmente alimentado por su conversación con Chad en el curso de aquella misma mañana. Todo, en resumidas cuentas, la hacía inconmensurablemente nueva y nada tan nuevo como la vieja casa y los objetos viejos. Había libros, dos o tres, en la mesita que había junto a la silla del hombre, pero no ostentaban las tapas de color limón con que sus ojos se habían entretenido desde su llegada y hasta la oportunidad de un mayor conocimiento de lo que, desde hacía una quincena, había enterrado por completo. En otra mesa, al fondo de la habitación, descubrió la gran *Revue;* pero aquella portada familiar, distinguida en los salones de la señora Newsome, apenas si prestaba allí una nota de modernidad. Estaba seguro —y más tarde habría de saber que estaba en lo cierto— de que aquel detalle se debía a la mano de Chad. ¿Qué habría dicho la señora Newsome ante la circunstancia de que la interesada «influencia» de Chad hubiera introducido el abrecartas femenino en la *Revue?* La interesada influencia, en cualquier caso, había ido, como decimos, derecha al asunto: y, a decir verdad, pronto lo había rebasado.

La dama estaba sentada junto al hogar en una silla pequeña, tapizada y con orlas, uno de los pocos artículos modernos de la sala; y estaba echada hacia atrás con las manos unidas en el regazo y sin el menor movimiento en toda su persona salvo la elegante y solícita gesticulación de su cara asombrosamente juvenil. El fuego del hogar, bajo el mármol blanco, desnudo y académico, había reducido la leña a cenizas plateadas; una de las ventanas, a cierta distancia, estaba abierta a la dulzura y tranquilidad de las que, en las breves pausas, llegaba el ruido débil, agradable y doméstico, casi rústico, del chapoteo y la trápala de *sabots* de alguna cochera situada al otro lado del patio. Mme. de Vionnet, en el rato que Strether llevaba allí, no había cambiado de postura ni un centímetro.

—No me parece que crea usted con seriedad en lo que hace —dijo la mujer—; pero, de todos modos, entiéndame, le trataré como si así fuera.

—Con lo que me da a entender —replicó Strether directamente— que usted no cree. Le aseguro a usted que no tendrá la menor importancia la forma en que me trate.

—Bueno —dijo ella, tomando aquella amenaza con valentía y filosofía sobradas—, lo único que de veras importa es que usted se lleve bien conmigo.

—¡Ah, pues ése no es mi caso! —replicó el hombre al instante.

Aquello permitió otra pausa a la mujer; pausa que la mujer cortó, sin embargo, con alegría.

—¿Se avendría a continuar conmigo un poco, como si, provisionalmente, fuera su caso?

Fue entonces cuando comprendió el hombre la decidida andadura de la mujer; acompañada en aquel momento por el extraordinario efecto resultante de haber alzado, tras haberlos tenido por debajo del hombre, sus hermosos ojos suplicantes. El hombre podía haber'estado en el umbral de su propia puerta o en su ventana, y la mujer de pie en el camino. Durante un momento la dejaría donde estaba; además, él no habría podido hablar. La tristeza había hecho aparición, de súbito, una tristeza[9] que fue como una bocanada de aire frío en el rostro masculino.

—¿Qué puedo hacer —dijo Strether por fin—, sino escucharla como prometí a Chadwick?

—Ah, pero lo que yo le pido —dijo la mujer al instante— no es lo que el señor Newsome pensaba. —Hablaba, según entendió el hombre, como quien afronta con valentía *todos* los peligros—. Lo que le he dicho es idea mía y algo bien distinto.

Lo que, a decir verdad, permitió al pobre Strether —intranquilo como estaba ya, además— sentir un poco la emoción de una justificada percepción temeraria.

—Bueno —respondió con notoria amabilidad—, hace un instante estaba seguro de que alguna idea propia se le habría ocurrido.

La mujer parecía mirarle otra vez desde abajo, pero ya con mayor serenidad.

—Me di cuenta de ello... y esta circunstancia contribuyó a la ocurrencia. De modo que, ya ve —prosiguió—: nos llevamos bien.

—Oh, pero se me antoja que no he atendido en modo alguno a su petición. ¿Cómo voy a hacerlo si no la entiendo?

—No es necesario que usted deba, por fuerza, entenderla; bastará con que la recuerde. Limítese a creer que confío en usted... y por nada tremendo en definitiva. Únicamente —dijo ella con maravillosa sonrisa— por educación normal y corriente.

Strether hizo una larga pausa mientras volvían a estar frente por frente, tal como habían estado, apenas menos percatados, antes de que la pobre dama hubiera cruzado el Rubicón. Y era la pobre dama para Strether porque, saltaba a la vista, tenía algún problema y su apelación al hombre sólo podía significar que la tribulación era profunda. Él no podía resolverla; no era asunto suyo; nada había hecho; pero en virtud de un juego de manos la mujer, sin saber cómo, había hecho de aquel encuentro una relación. Y la relación era provechosa por multitud de cosas que no estaban, estrictamente hablando, en la relación ni a la relación pertenecían; por el mismo aire que los dos adoptaban, por la distinguida, fresca, delicada sala, por el mundo exterior y la lejana trápala del patio, por el primer imperio y las reliquias de los plúteos atestados, por adminículos tan extemporáneos como aquellos y por otros tan próximos como las manos femeninas juntas en el regazo y el talante que su expresión había de hacer más natural cuando sus ojos más fijos estuviesen.

—Usted cuenta conmigo, naturalmente, para algo mucho mayor de lo que parece.

—Oh, es que ya parece muy grande —respondió la mujer echándose a reír.

El hombre habría de encontrarse en el brete de decirle que era, como la señorita Barrace había dicho, una mujer maravillosa; pero, conteniéndose, dijo otra cosa en su lugar.

—¿Qué pensaba Chad que usted debía decirme?

—Ah, lo que él pensaba era, sencillamente, lo que siempre piensa un hombre: ahorrar a la mujer todo esfuerzo.

—¿La mujer...? —repitió Strether muy despacio.

—La mujer que a él le gusta... y sólo en la medida en que le gusta. En la medida, además, por dar la vuelta al problema, en que a ella le gusta *él.*

Strether comprendió; entonces, con una brusquedad muy suya:

—¿Cuánto le gusta Chad?

—Tanto como *eso:* cargarlo todo, incluido usted, sobre mis hombros. —Pero la mujer cambió de tema en el acto—. He estado hablando como si mi equilibrio dependiera de lo que usted pudiera pensar de mí; todavía —añadió maravillosamente— estoy tragando el aire a bocanadas y, sí, lo reconozco, haciendo de tripas corazón, con la esperanza de que no me vea usted como mujer imposible.

—Salta a la vista —observó el hombre tras unos segundos— que así es como no me ve *usted.*

—Bueno —admitió ella a su manera—, como usted no ha dicho aún que *no* va a tener conmigo la poca paciencia que le solicito...

—¿Saca usted conclusiones espléndidas? Perfectamente. Pero el caso es que no comprendo éstas —

continuó Strether—. Usted parece pedirme mucho más de lo que necesita. En perjuicio o beneficio de ambos, ¿qué puedo hacer yo, a fin de cuentas? No puedo hacer uso de ninguna coacción que no haya utilizado ya. En realidad, viene usted tarde con su petición. Ya he hecho, por mi cuenta, todo lo que el caso admite. He dado mi opinión y aquí me tiene.

—¡Sí, aquí le tengo, por fortuna! —Mme. de Vionnet se echó a reír—. La señora Newsome —añadió en otro tono— no piensa que usted pueda hacer tan poco.

El hombre vaciló, pero se las arregló para pronunciar las palabras.

—Bueno, así piensa ahora.

—¿Con eso quiere decir...? —Pero también ella quedó en suspenso.

—¿Qué quiero decir?

La mujer seguía dudando.

—Dispense si lo saco a relucir, pero si le hablo de cosas extraordinarias, ¿por qué no voy a poder? Además, ¿no es justo que nos preocupemos de saberlo?

—Saber ¿qué? —insistió el hombre cuando, después de andarse por las ramas de aquella manera, la mujer había dejado las cosas otra vez a medias.

Pero hizo un esfuerzo.

—¿Ha roto ella con usted?

El hombre se sorprendería después de la sencillez y calma con que había oído aquello.

—Todavía no. —Era como si se sintiera un poco desilusionado: había esperado todavía más de la libertad femenina. Pero continuó de todas formas—: ¿Es eso lo que Chad le ha dicho que va a ocurrirme?

Evidentemente, la mujer estaba encantada con la forma en que se lo tomaba Strether.

—Si con ello pregunta usted si hemos hablado al respecto... desde luego que sí. Y no es lo último que tiene que ver con mi deseo de hablar con usted.

—Juzgar si soy la clase de hombre que una mujer *puede...?*

—¡Ni más ni menos —exclamó ella—, caballero maravilloso! Yo juzgo: *ya* he juzgado. Una mujer no puede. Está usted a salvo: con todo el derecho a estarlo. Y sería mucho más fácil si lo creyese.

Strether guardó un momento de silencio; luego se encontró hablando con un cinismo confidencial cuyas fuentes, incluso en aquel momento, le eran extrañas.

—Hago lo posible por creer. Pero es asombroso —exclamó— que *usted lo* haya descubierto.

—Oh —alcanzó a decir la mujer—, recuerde cuánto tuvo que costarme, por mediación del señor Newsome, antes de que nos viéramos, llegar a ello. Él confía plenamente en su fortaleza.

—Bueno, puedo soportarlo casi todo —nuestro amigo se interrumpió con brusquedad. Intensa y hermosa, en aquel momento, la sonrisa femenina volvió a aparecer y con el resultado de hacer que el hombre oyera lo que había dicho ni más ni menos que como ella lo había oído. No le costó mucho deducir que aquello le traicionaba, pero, a decir verdad, ¿no había conducido todo a tal circunstancia? Había sido muy bonito pensar por un momento que tenía a la mujer en un puño y que la había forzado; ¿y qué es lo que había hecho sino dejar que viera, prácticamente, que él aceptaba la relación? ¿Cuál era su relación, además —aunque intangible y formalmente breve todavía—, sino lo que ella tuviera a bien disponer? Nada podía impedir —él no, ciertamente— que ella la hiciera agradable. En el fondo de su cabeza, detrás de todo, palpitaba la convicción de que se trataba —allí mismo, ante él, junto a él, de una forma vívida e imperativa — de una de esas raras mujeres de las que tan a menudo había oído y leído cosas, en las que tanto había pensado, pero con las que nunca había tropezado y cuya sola presencia, aspecto, voz, cuya sola contemporaneidad fáctica, desde el momento de su presencia cabal, bastaba para trocar el reconocimiento en relación. No era aquella la clase de mujer que había visto en la señora Newsome, una contemporaneidad fáctica que había sido manifiestamente parsimoniosa en el propio establecimiento; y, en aquel momento, delante de Mme. de Vionnet, experimentaba la simplicidad de su impresión primera de la señorita Gostrey. Esta, a decir verdad, había sido una facticidad de rápido desarrollo; pero el mundo era inmenso y cada día se volvía una lección con mayor celeridad. Había, en cualquier caso, incluso entre los desconocidos, relaciones y relaciones. Acepto, naturalmente, el gran estilo de Chad —a lo que añadió en seguida—: No le ha costado mucho convencerme.

La mujer pareció negar brevemente, por lo que al joven respectaba, mediante un alzamiento de cejas, esbozo de un gesto en modo alguno desconsiderado.

—Sin duda sabe usted la tristeza que representaría para él que usted sufriera alguna pérdida. Confía en que usted sabrá tener paciente a su madre.

Strether meditó aquello sin dejar de mirarla.

—Entiendo. Así pues, es *eso* lo que usted quiere realmente de mí. Pero ¿cómo voy a hacerlo? Tal vez me lo aclare usted.

—Sencillamente, dígale la verdad a ella.

—¿Y qué es la verdad para usted?

—Bueno, *cualquier* verdad, acerca de nosotros, que vea usted por sí mismo. Lo dejo a su elección.

—Muchas gracias. Me gusta —dijo Strether riendo con cierta severidad— la forma como deja usted las cosas.

No obstante, la mujer insistió con amabilidad y dulzura, como si restara malicia al negocio.

—Sea totalmente honrado. Dígaselo todo.

—¿Todo? —repitió el hombre con extrañeza.

—Cuéntele la verdad desnuda. —Mme. de Vionnet seguía desenvolviéndose en el mismo tono.

—Sí, pero ¿cuál es la verdad desnuda? Porque es eso precisamente lo que quiero averiguar.

Mme. de Vionnet paseó la mirada a su alrededor durante un momento, pero no tardó en posarla otra vez en el hombre.

—Háblele, con amplitud y claridad, de *nosotras.*

Strether, mientras tanto, había mantenido fija la mirada.

—¿De usted y de su hija?

—Sí: de la pequeña Jeanne y de mí. Dígale —la mujer se estremeció ligeramente— que simpatiza usted con nosotras.

—¿Y qué provecho sacaré yo de eso? Mejor aún —rectificó—, ¿qué provecho sacarán *ustedes?*

La mujer adoptó una actitud más seria.

—Ninguna, según usted, ¿no es cierto?

Strether vaciló.

—Ella no me envió para que yo «simpatizara» con ustedes.

—Oh —protestó encantadoramente la mujer—, ella le envió para arrostrar los hechos.

El hombre admitió segundos después que algo de aquello había.

—Pero ¿cómo voy a arrostrarlos mientras no sepa cuáles son? ¿Quiere usted —añadió, preparándose para la pregunta— que él se case con su hija?

La mujer imprimió a la cabeza una sacudida tan noble como impremeditada.

—No. No se trata de eso.

—Pero ¿no es cierto que él lo desea?

La mujer repitió el movimiento, pero con una extraña expresión esta vez.

—Ella le gusta demasiado.

Strether quedó sorprendido.

—¿Hasta el punto de considerar, dice usted, la cuestión de llevársela a América?

—Hasta el punto de no ser con ella sino tremendamente amable y educado: muy tierno, a decir verdad. Nosotros velamos por ella y usted debe ayudarnos. Debe usted verla otra vez.

Strether se sintió incómodo.

—Ah, con mucho gusto... es tan notablemente atractiva.

La vehemencia maternal con que Mme. de Vionnet respondió a esto habría de recordarla Strether después como un hermoso gesto lleno de gracia.

—¿Le gusta a *usted* la dulce criatura? —Y como el hombre respondiera con un «¡Oh!» prolongado de entusiasmo—: Es perfecta. Es mi alegría.

—Bueno, no me cabe la menor duda... si estuviera cerca de ella y la viera más a menudo... de que también sería la mía.

—Entonces —dijo Mme. de Vionnet—, dígale eso a la señora Newsome.

El hombre se sorprendió al máximo.

—¿Qué provecho sacará usted de eso? —Y como la mujer se limitara a dudar, el hombre añadió—: ¿Esta su hija enamorada de nuestro amigo?

—Ah —respondió la mujer más bien sorprendida—, ¡preferiría que lo descubriera!

El hombre manifestó a su vez su sorpresa.

—¿Yo? ¿Un extraño?

—Oh, no tardará usted en dejar de serlo... dentro de poco. Podrá usted verla, se lo aseguro, como si no lo fuera en modo alguno.

Aquello se le antojó, sin embargo, una idea extraordinaria.

—Me parece, evidentemente, que si la madre de ella no puede...

—Ah, las jóvenes y sus madres modernas —exclamó la mujer de manera más bien inconsecuente. Pero se detuvo en algo que le pareció más a propósito—. Dígale a ella que he sido buena con él. ¿No opina usted lo mismo?

Aquello afectaría al hombre, en su momento, bastante más de lo que pensaba. Se sentía, no obstante, conscientemente picado con suficiencia.

—Oh, si fueran todos *ustedes*...

—Bueno, puede que «todos» no —le interrumpió la mujer—, pero sí una proporción respetable. De veras —añadió en un tono que había de ocupar un lugar entre las cosas que el hombre recordaría.

—En tal caso es maravilloso... —El hombre dedicó una sonrisa a la mujer en un rostro que él advertía tirante y fue la cara femenina quien durante un momento le mantuvo en aquel estado.

Por fin también ella se levantó.

—Bueno, ¿no lo cree usted así para que...?

—¿Para que yo deba salvarla a usted? —Fue por esto por lo que la idea de entrevistarse con ella (y la idea también, en cierto modo, de marcharse) se le había ocurrido. Se oyó a sí mismo utilizar aquella palabra exagerada, cuyo solo sonido contribuyó a determinar su partida—. La salvaré si está en mi mano.

II

En la encantadora casa de Chad, sin embargo, diez días después, en el curso de una tarde, intuyó que estaba a las puertas del desenlace del tímido secreto de Jeanne de Vionnet. Había cenado allí mismo en compañía de la damisela y de su madre, así como de otras personas, y había pasado al *petit salon,* a petición de Chad, con el objeto de hablar con ella. El joven se lo había propuesto como un favor.

—Me gustaría tanto saber lo que piensa usted de ella. Tendrá ocasión —había dicho— de ver a la *jeune fille,* quiero decir el carácter, tal como es en realidad, y no me parece que sea algo que usted, como observador de la conducta, deba descuidar. Será una impresión que, junto con otras cosas, se llevará usted consigo a la patria, donde encontrará tanto con que compararla.

Strether sabía muy bien con qué quería Chad que la comparase y aunque estaba totalmente de acuerdo todavía no había reflexionado con tanta profundidad que se hubiera acostumbrado, por más que continuamente, aunque para su sayo, así lo manifestase. Estaba muy lejos de saber con precisión hasta qué extremo; pero se sentía, pese a todo, acompañado siempre de un sentido del servicio que prestaba. No alcanzaba a concebir sino que tal servicio era sumamente agradable a quienes beneficiaba; y, a decir verdad, aún esperaba el momento de sorprenderlo en el acto de revelarse desagradable, de revelarse en cierta medida intolerable para él. No comprendía de qué modo se aclararía del todo su situación, lógicamente, como no fuera en virtud de un giro de los acontecimientos que le diera el pretexto del malestar. Partía todos los días de la posibilidad del malestar, pero cada día que pasaba descubría en el intervalo un nuevo y más atractivo recodo en el camino. La posibilidad antedicha se encontraba en aquel momento más lejos que en la víspera de su llegada y el hombre estaba totalmente seguro de que, de presentarse de pronto, habría de ser, cuando menos, inconsecuente y violenta. Sólo le pareció estar un poco más cerca de ella cuando se preguntó qué servicio, en aquella vida tan útil, estaba, a fin de cuentas, prestando a la señora Newsome. Cuando deseaba creer que él era todavía intachable reflexionaba —y, a decir verdad, con sobresalto— sobre la indemne frecuencia de la correspondencia de ambos; en relación con la cual, ¿no era, al fin y al cabo, lo más lógico que fuera más frecuente, ni más ni menos que en proporción con la complicación gradual del problema?

Cierto que, en cualquier caso, el problema tenía ya sus puntos consoladores, sobre todo con la abundosa conciencia de la carta de la víspera: «Bueno, ¿qué otra cosa puedo hacer? ¿Qué puedo hacer sino contárselo a ella todo?» Para convencerse de que, en efecto, se lo contaba, de que se lo había contado a ella todo, solía pensar en detalles secundarios que no le había explicado. Cuando, en momentos singulares y en la vigilia de la noche, se centraba en uno, por lo general se revelaba al cabo —y tras un análisis más profundo— como bastante alejado del meollo de la cuestión. Cuando se le ocurría algo nuevo o algo ya advertido reaparecía, siempre lo escribía en el acto, como con miedo de que, si no lo hiciera, fuera a olvidarlo; y también de que pudiera decirse de vez en vez: «Ella lo sabe *ya,* es inútil preocuparse». Por regla general, le tranquilizaba considerablemente no haber pasado por alto las cosas que precisaban claridad y explicación; no haber llegado a aquellas alturas a un punto muerto en que no ocurría nada o en que las cosas quedaban veladas y atenuadas. Ella lo sabía ya; esto era lo que se decía en la presente noche en relación con la reciente amistad de Chad con las dos damas... por no hablar de la más reciente y propia. En otras palabras, la señora Newsome sabía aquella misma noche y en Woollett que él conocía a Mme. de Vionnet y que había ido a verla con conocimiento de causa; sabía, además, que la encontraba notablemente atractiva y que sin duda habría mucho más que contar al respecto. Pero también sabía —o sabría muy prontoque, con no menor conocimiento de causa, él no había de repetir la visita; y que cuando Chad hubiera de preguntarle, de parte de la condesa —Strether intuía el condado con viveza, con una imagen en lo más profundo de su intelecto— qué día le parecía mejor para cenar con ella, él había respondido con lucidez: «Muchas gracias, pero... no es posible». Había rogado al joven que presentara sus excusas y había

esperado que entendiera que no era lo correcto. No había informado a la señora Newsome que había prometido «salvar» a Mme. de Vionnet; pero, en la medida en que le afectaba este hecho, no había, en cualquier caso, prometido merodear la casa de la mujer. Lo que Chad había comprendido sólo podía inferirse, a decir verdad, de la conducta de Chad, que había sido tan liberal, en este sentido, como en cualquier otro. Era liberal siempre que entendía; era más liberal aún, si cabe, cuando no comprendía; había replicado que no se preocupara y había procedido a sustituir la ocasión presente —como dispuesto estaba a sustituir otras— por cualquiera, por cualquier ocasión respecto de la que su viejo amigo fuera a sentir graciosos escrúpulos.

—Oh, pero yo no soy extranjera; soy tan inglesa como la que más —le había dicho Jeanne de Vionnet en cuanto él tomó asiento, en el *petit salon* y con timidez más que suficiente, en el lugar que junto a la joven había dejado vacío Mme. Gloriani al acercarse el hombre. Mme. Gloriani, que vestía de terciopelo negro y encajes blancos, y llevaba el cabello empolvado, y cuya en cierto modo maciza majestad se derretía al menor contacto en la gracia de cualquier idioma incomprensible, se había alejado para dejar el sitio al ambiguo caballero, tras un amable saludo que, en el sentir masculino, entrañaba, entre misteriosos acentos, una especie de reconocimiento facial de hacía dos domingos. Entonces había observado el hombre —aprovechándose al máximo de su edad— que le asustaba no poco descubrirse dedicado al entretenimiento de una joven extranjera. Había chicas de las que no tenía miedo: era bastante atrevido con las jóvenes norteamericanas. De modo que ella había tenido que defenderse al final.

—Oh, pero también soy casi norteamericana. Es lo que mamá quena que yo fuese, quiero decir más o menos así, ya que no desea sino que goce de mucha libertad. Ella conoce las ventajas de esta circunstancia.

Le parecía innegablemente hermosa: un vago retrato al pastel encerrado en un marco ovalado; pensaba ya en ella como en una imagen indefinible sita en una larga galería, retrato de una princesita antigua de la que no se sabía sino que había muerto joven. La pequeña Jeanne no iba, qué duda cabía, a morir joven, pero, de todos modos, no se podía tratar con ella con suficiente lucidez. Era notorio; era notorio que *él,* en cualquier caso, no soportaría responsabilizarse, en relación con ella, de los problemas de un joven. Odiosos eran, a decir verdad, los problemas de un joven; a ella no se la podía tratar como a una criada sospechosa de tener un «tórtolo». Y en cuanto a los jóvenes, en cuanto a los jóvenes... bueno, era asunto de ellos o, en cualquier caso, de ella. Ella estaba agitada, hermosamente entusiasmada —hasta el punto de provocar la lucecita que aparecía y desaparecía en sus ojos y el par de manchas rosadas que coloreaban sus mejillas— con la gran aventura de cenar fuera y la aventura mayor, si cabe, de estar con un caballero al que sin duda estimaba muy, muy viejo, un caballero con lentes, arrugas y un bigote largo y grisáceo. Hablaba el inglés más bonito, pensaba nuestro amigo, que había oído en la vida, al igual que había creído, minutos antes, que hablaba el más bello francés. Se preguntaba casi con melancolía si un diapasón de aquel estilo no revertiría sobre el espíritu; de hecho, antes de saberlo, su fantasía había comenzado a vagabundear y maquinar hasta tal extremo que acabó por descubrirse a sí mismo, ausente y extravagante, al lado de la joven en amistoso silencio. Sólo entonces advirtió que la agitación femenina había desaparecido, afortunadamente, y que la muchacha estaba más tranquila. De hecho, confiaba en él, simpatizaba con él y él había de recordar después que la joven le había contado ciertas cosas. Había recurrido ella al expediente de la espera, por fin, sin oleadas ni escalofríos: nada sino el leve rocío que podía provocar en aquella agradable calidez, nada sino la saludable y continua inmersión en la espera antedicha. Al cabo de diez minutos de compañía, la impresión del hombre —con todo lo que se había despejado y añadido— era completa. La joven había sido libre, según entendía ella la libertad, parcialmente para darle a conocer que, a diferencia de otras personitas que conocía, ella se había embebido en aquel ideal. Era deliciosamente rebuscada consigo misma, pero lo que más interesaba al hombre era la imagen del embebecimiento. El hombre no tardaría en advertir que éste consistía en realidad en algo pequeño y grandioso a la vez, en que, fuera cual fuese la naturaleza de la joven, estaba ya totalmente —el hombre hubo de tantear en busca de la palabra, pero ésta se le ocurrió por fin— educada. No podía, naturalmente, dada la breve relación que les unía, decir nada de su naturaleza, pero era la idea de la educación lo que la oven había despertado en el intelecto masculino. Jamás la había visto con tan patente manifestación. Su madre la evidenciaba, sin lugar a dudas; pero la madre, para hacer el hecho menos notorio, evidenciaba además otras cosas y en ninguna de las dos ocasiones anteriores, mujer extraordinaria, intuía Strether, nada que se pareciera a lo que ella evidenciaba aquella noche. La pequeña Jeanne era un caso, un caso exquisito de educación, mientras que la condesa, en quien tanto le divertía pensar con este apelativo, era un caso, asimismo exquisito, de... bueno, no sabía qué.

—Nuestro joven amigo tiene un gusto maravilloso —fue lo que Gloriani le dijo al terminar la observación de un pequeño cuadro colgado junto a la puerta de la estancia. La celebridad en cuestión acababa de entrar, al parecer en busca de Mlle. de Vionnet, pero mientras Strether se levantaba, el invitado, con la mirada atenta, se había detenido para una prolongada observación. El objeto era un paisaje de tamaño reducido, de la escuela francesa, como nuestro amigo se alegraba de creer que sabía, y también de

una calidad... que le gustaba pensar que habría tenido que calcular también; el marco excedía el tamaño del lienzo; nunca había visto a nadie mirar nada, estimó, como Gloriani miraba, con la nariz muy próxima y con rápidos movimientos de cabeza de lado a lado y de arriba abajo, aquella pieza de la colección de Chad. El artista se sirvió de este término segundos después, mientras sonreía con cortesía, limpiaba sus quevedos y acto seguido miraba a su alrededor: mientras, en una palabra, rendía al lugar, por el solo hecho de su presencia y por algo que Strether imaginó que podía descifrar en su singular mirada, un tributo tal que, al sentir de este último, situaba las cosas de una vez por todas. Strether se dio cuenta en aquel instante, ya que hablamos de ello, y con una intensidad no conocida hasta entonces, de qué modo, a su alrededor y a despecho de sí, estaban coherentemente situadas. La sonrisa de Gloriani, muy italiana e inescrutable sin perder la elegancia, según consideró, había representado para él durante la cena, en la que no se habían sentado juntos, un vago sentido de bienvenida, pero la cualidad ya desvanecida había aparecido en aquella ocasión para revelar su interioridad; como si el vínculo momentáneo proporcionado por la compartida incertidumbre se hubiera roto. Sabía en aquel momento cuál era la verdad última, una verdad consistente en que no había habido tanto incertidumbre como diferencia; tanto más cuanto que, por encima de la diferencia, el célebre escultor parecía dedicarle una gesticulación casi de condolencia, ¡oh, cuán vacía, sin embargo!, como del otro lado de una inmensa superficie de agua. Tendía el puente de una civilización encantadora y hueca al que Strether no habría confiado todo su peso ni un instante. La idea, aunque fugaz y acaso tardía solamente, había llevado a cabo la tarea de tranquilizar a Strether y la imagen borrosa había desaparecido ya: había desaparecido en virtud de algo que se decía y en virtud de su reparo, con otro rápido vuelco, de que Gloriani estaba ahora en el sofá y hablaba con Jeanne, mientras él volvía a oír la conocida familiaridad y el evasivo significado del «¡Oh, oh, oh!» que le había llevado, quince días atrás, a provocar a la señorita Barrace en vano. Tenía ella siempre el aire, esta dama pintoresca y original, que se le antojaba, con singular extrañeza, lo mismo antiguo que moderno: el aire de contar una broma que ya se hubiera disfrutado con ella. El detalle, sin duda, era lo antiguo, pero era el uso que de él hacía lo que era moderno. Le daba en la nariz en aquel momento que la bien intencionada ironía femenina estaba en relación con alguna cosa y le molestaba un tanto que la mujer no fuera más explicita y se limitase a asegurarle, con ese placer de la observación tan evidente en ella, que no le iba a decir ni una palabra más.

Sólo pudo recurrir a preguntarle qué había hecho ella con Waymarsh, aunque debiera añadirse que le pareció descubrir un indicio una vez que la mujer le hubo respondido que el personaje en cuestión estaba, en la otra sala, enfrascado en una charla con Mme. de Vionnet. Observó durante un instante la imagen de esta yuxtaposición; entonces, en pro de la señorita Barrace, preguntó:

—¿Está ella también, en tal caso, bajo el influjo...?

—No, ni pizca —respondió con prontitud la señorita Barrace—. El no le importa nada; está aburrida; no le será de mucha ayuda respecto de este hombre.

—Oh —exclamó Strether riendo—, ella no puede hacerlo todo.

—Claro que no... aunque es maravillosa. Además, a él tampoco le importa *ella.* De mí no obtendrá nada... aunque no me cabe duda de que no se complicaría en más asuntos, por más que pudiera. Nunca —añadió la señorita Barrace— la he visto fracasar con nadie. Y esta noche, que está tan magnífica, se le antojaría extraño... si reparase en ello. De modo que, sea como fuere, es todo mío. *Je suis tranquile!*

Strether comprendió en la medida en que podía comprender; pero le interesaba más el indicio aludido.

—¿Le parece ella esta noche particular magnífica?

—Por supuesto. Como nunca, diría yo. ¿No lo cree usted así? Vaya, es *por* usted.

El hombre insistió en su inocencia.

—¿«Por» mí...?

—¡Oh, oh, oh! —exclamó la señorita Barrace, que insistía en la cualidad opuesta.

—Bueno —admitió el hombre con sensibilidad—, es diferente. Es una mujer alegre.

—¡Alegre! —dijo la señorita Barrace riendo—. Y tiene una espalda preciosa... aunque esto no tiene nada de particular.

—No —dijo Strether—, se podía estar seguro de su espalda. No se trata de su espalda, sin embargo.

Su compañera, con renovado regocijo y el tacto más delicado, entre bocanadas de humo del cigarrillo y la alegría de los objetos, parecía encontrar la conversación sumamente deliciosa.

—Sí, no se trata de su espalda.

—¿De qué, entonces? —preguntó Strether con avidez.

—Bueno, de *ella*... sencillamente. De su porte. De su encanto.

—Claro que se trata de su encanto, pero estamos hablando de su particularidad.

—Bueno —explicó la señorita Barrace—, es simplemente brillante, como suele decirse. Nada más. Es versátil. Equivalente a cincuenta mujeres.

—Ah, pero es sólo una —quiso aclarar Strether— de una vez.

—Puede. ¡Pero cincuenta veces...!

—Oh, no caigamos en eso —dijo nuestro amigo, no tardó en apuntar en otro sentido—. ¿Me respondería usted a una pregunta sencilla? ¿Se divorciará alguna vez?

La señorita Barrace le miró fijamente a través de sus impertinentes.

—¿Por qué había de hacerlo?

Strether se dio cuenta de que no era aquello lo que él había preguntado; pero lo aceptó de todos modos.

—Para casarse con Chad.

—¿Por qué tendría ella que casarse con Chad?

—Porque estoy convencido de que le tiene mucho afecto. Ha hecho maravillas con él.

—¿De qué otro modo podría hacer más? Casarse con un hombre, o con una mujer —prosiguió sabiamente la señorita Barrace—, no es nunca una maravilla, ya que cualquier fulano y cualquier mengana pueden hacerlo. Lo pasmoso es hacer cosas así sin casarse.

Strether consideró durante unos momentos aquel planteamiento.

—¿Quiere usted decir que es tan hermoso para nuestros amigos que han de seguir así?

Contuviera lo que contuviese la frase masculina, la mujer se echó a reír.

—Muy hermoso.

El, sin embargo, insistió.

—¿Porque es desinteresado?

La mujer, pese a todo, se cansó de repente de aquel tema.

—Sí, digamos que es así. Además, no se divorciará nunca. Por otro lado —añadió—, no se crea todo lo que se dice del marido.

—¿No es entonces —preguntó Strether— un infeliz?

—Oh, sí. Pero encantador.

—¿Lo conoce usted?

—Nos han presentado. Es *bien amiable.*

—¿Con todos, salvo con su mujer?

—Oh, por lo que sé, también lo es con ella... con cualquiera, con todas las mujeres. Espero que, de todos modos —añadió la mujer con brusco giro—, sepa apreciar usted la atención que dedico al señor Waymarsh.

—Oh, infinitamente. —Pero Strether no iba en aquel sentido—. Así pues —sentenció de plano—, se trata de un vínculo inocente.

—¿El mío y el suyo? Ah —exclamó riendo—, no le dé a todo un tinte sentimental.

—Quiero decir que nuestro amigo está aquí... por la dama de quien hemos hablado. —Era esto lo que Strether había deducido como consecuencia indirecta, aunque no menos pertinente, de la impresión que le había causado Jeanne. Tal era la postura que quería adoptar—. Es inocente —repitió—, puedo verlo con claridad.

Confundida por la rotunda afirmación masculina, la mujer había echado un vistazo a Gloriani como si fuese éste el objeto innominado de la alusión del hombre, pero no tardó en comprender inmediatamente; aunque, a decir verdad, no antes de que Strether hubiera advertido la confusión momentánea y preguntándose qué habría detrás de esto. Sabía ya que el escultor admiraba a Mme. de Vionnet; pero ¿indicaba además esta admiración un tipo de vínculo en que la inocencia era discutible? A las claras se estaba introduciendo en una atmósfera extraña y pisando un terreno que no era de los más firmes. Miró con severidad durante un momento a la señorita Barrace, pero ésta ya había vuelto a tomar la palabra.

—¿Está bien la señora Newsome? Bueno, por supuesto que tiene que estarlo —con lo que volvió alegremente al tema de su buen amigo—. Tal vez se sorprenda usted de no verme cansada de tanto Toro Sentado como tengo que tratar... ¡y no son pocos! Pero no, ¿sabe usted?, no me importa; lo soporto y nos llevamos admirablemente. Soy muy extraña; me gusta serlo; y no siempre sé explicarme. Hay personas que se estiman interesantes o notables o lo que sea, y que me aburren hasta la muerte; y hay otras de las que nadie sabe qué se puede ver en ellas: en las que yo, en pocas palabras, lo veo todo. —Luego, tras una bocanada de humo—: Sepa usted que es un hombre conmovedor —dijo.

—¿Saber? —dijo Strether—. ¿Acaso no lo sé ya? Sin duda la conmovemos hasta el punto de hacerla llorar.

—Oh, pero si no hablo de *usted-dijo* ella riendo.

—Debiera hacerlo, en tal caso, pues el peor síntoma de todos, como debe de ser mi caso respecto de usted, es que usted no pueda ayudarme. Ello se da cuando una mujer se compadece.

—¡Ah, pero si yo puedo ayudarle! —insistió la mujer con delicadeza.

Volvió a mirarla con severidad, y luego, tras una pausa:

—¡No, no puede usted!

Los lentes femeninos, con su larga cadenita, dejaron de tintinear.

—Ya le ayudo con Toro Sentado. Y no está mal.

—Ah, sí, eso. —Pero Strether dudaba—. ¿Quiere usted decir que él habla de mí?

—¿De modo que tengo que defenderle a usted? Nunca, jamás.

—Comprendo —dijo Strether con buen humor—. Es demasiado profundo.

—Su único defecto —replicó ella— es que todo resulta demasiado profundo cuando se está con él. Tiene abismos de silencio... que sólo quebranta tras larguísimos intervalos para hacer una observación. Y cuando ésta se da, es siempre por algo que ha visto o experimentado por sí mismo: jamás hay nada *banal.* Es esto lo que habría podido temerse y lo que me mataría. Pero ni por esas. —La mujer aspiró otra bocanada de humo mientras, con divertida complacencia, apreciaba su adquisición—. Y nunca respecto de usted. Respecto de usted tenemos claras las cosas. Somos extraordinarios. Pero le diré lo que sí hace —continuó—: quiere hacerme regalos.

—¿Regalos? —repitió el pobre Strether, consciente con una súbita punzada, de que *él* aún no había probado aquello en ningún terreno.

—Bueno, sí —se explicó la mujer—, y tiene un aspecto elegantísimo en la victoria[10]; de modo que cuando le dejo, como hago a menudo casi durante horas (a él le gusta), ante las tiendas, el verle allí me ayuda, cuando salgo, a reconocer mi coche de lejos. Pero a veces, en cambio, entra conmigo y entonces he de hacer cuanto está en mi mano para evitar que me compre cosas.

—¿Acaso quiere «entretenerla»? —Strether casi se ahogó al considerar todo lo que no había pensado por su cuenta. Le asaltó un sentido de la admiración—. Oh, está en la auténtica tradición mucho más que yo. Sí —murmuró—, es la ira de los justos.

—¡La ira de los justos, precisamente! —y la señorita Barrace, que jamás había oído aquella expresión, reconoció su pertinencia con una palmada de sus manos enjoyadas—. Ahora sé por qué no es un hombre *banal.* Pero, de todas formas, evito que compre nada. Si usted viera lo que a veces elige. Así le ahorro una respetable cantidad de dinero. No acepto más que las flores.

—¡Flores! —repitió otra vez Strether, con un brote de resentimiento. ¿Cuántos ramos había regalado el actual interlocutor de la mujer?

—Flores inocentes —continuó ella—, todas las que quiere. Y me rodea de lujo; conoce los sitios mejores: él solo los encuentra; es maravilloso.

— *A mí* no me ha hablado de ellos —dijo sonriendo el amigo de la mujer—; tiene vida propia. —Pero Strether recapacitó en el hecho preclaro de que, por su cuenta, al fin y al cabo, jamás se le habría ocurrido a él. Waymarsh no tenía que tener en cuenta a la señora Waymarsh, mientras que Lambert Strether, en el lugar más honorable de sus pensamientos, tenía que pensar siempre en la señora Newsome. Además, le encantaba saber la medida en que su amigo estaba en la auténtica tradición. No obstante, había sacado sus propias conclusiones—. ¡Pues *vaya* ira! —Y añadió con mayor concreción—: Es una contrariedad.

La mujer comprendió; pero a cierta distancia.

—Eso me parece a mí. Pero ¿en qué sentido?

—Bueno, él piensa que yo tengo mi propia vida. ¡Y no es así!

—¿Que no la tiene? —La mujer tenía sus dudas y su carcajada vino a confirmarlo—. ¡Oh, oh, oh!

—No, no la tengo. Me da la sensación de que mi vida sólo existe para los demás.

—Ah, para los demás *y con* los demás. En la situación actual, por ejemplo, con...

—¿Con quién? —preguntó el hombre antes de que ella tuviera tiempo de decirlo.

El tono masculino la hizo vacilar y, mientras el hombre hacía cábalas, dijo la mujer de manera particular:

—Digamos con la señorita Gostrey. ¿Qué hace usted por *ella?*

Aquello sorprendió vivamente al hombre.

—¡Nada en absoluto!

III

Mme. de Vionnet, que había hecho acto de presencia mientras tanto, estaba ya muy cerca de ellos y la señorita Barrace, en consecuencia, en vez de arriesgar una réplica, volvió a convertirse, con una mirada que midió a la recién llegada de los pies a la cabeza, en unos sencillos y apreciadores impertinentes de mango largo. Había parecido a nuestro amigo, desde su primera aparición, que estaba vestida para una gran ocasión y seguía respondiendo más que nadie a la concepción reavivada en él durante la fiesta del jardín, la idea de la *femme du monde* en su hábito, que ella vivía. Su espalda, sus hombros, sus brazos desnudos eran

blancos y hermosos; la textura de su vestido, mezcla, suponía, de seda y crespón, era de un gris plateado tramado con tanta habilidad que daba la sensación de una cálida magnificencia; alrededor del cuello llevaba un collar de esmeraldas grandes, cuyo verde espectro se repetía, con menor intensidad, en otros puntos de la ropa, los bordados, el esmalte, el raso, en materias y detalles de vago deslumbre. La cabeza, increíblemente rubia y festiva hasta lo exquisito, era como una fantasía feliz, un rescate de lo antiguo en una arcaica y preciosa medalla, una moneda de plata del Renacimiento; mientras que sus delicados luminosidad y brillo, su alegría, su expresión, su decisión contribuían a producir un efecto que un poeta habría sentido entre mitológico y consuetudinario. La habría comparado con una diosa todavía medio ocupada con una nube matutina o con una ninfa del mar inmersa hasta la cintura en las ondas estivales. Por encima de todo, sugeríale la consideración de que la *femme du monde* -en tan elegantes estadios del prototipo— era, como la Cleopatra de la pieza teatral, variada y ciertamente polifacética. Tenía aspectos, caracteres, días, noches... o por lo menos hacía que apareciesen por misteriosa ley propia, cuando sucedía por añadidura que era también una mujer de genio. Unas veces era persona oscura y apagada, y otras ostentosa y extrovertida. Aquella noche se le antojaba ostentosa y extrovertida, aunque intuía el hombre la brusquedad desnuda de la fórmula, ya que, en virtud de uno de los atajos del genio, había tomado por sorpresa todas las clasificaciones masculinas. Por dos veces durante la cena había sostenido el hombre la prolongada mirada de Chad; pero estos detalles comunicativos no habían servido, a decir verdad, sino para remover viejas ambigüedades: tan poco aclaraban si se trataba de una llamada o una admonición. «Ya ve usted lo decidido que estoy», parecían insinuar; sin embargo era esta decisión lo que Strether no veía. No obstante, tal la viera en la presente ocasión.

—¿Me haría usted el inmenso favor de ir a relevar a Newsome, durante unos minutos, de la más bien acuciante responsabilidad de Mme. Gloriani, mientras tengo unas palabras, si A él me lo permite, con el señor Strether, a quien tengo algo que preguntar? Nuestro anfitrión quisiera hablar con otras damas y yo no tardaré en volver a rescatarla.

Había hecho esta oferta a la señorita Barrace como si se le hubiera despertado la conciencia de un deber especial, pero la percatación del ligero sobresalto de Strether al escucharla —como si hubiese asistido a una traición de parte del presidente de un país sometido— fue tan silenciosa como el propio comentario del hombre; momentos después, cuando la común amiga hubo aceptado de buen talante y se hubo alejado, tenía algo más en que pensar.

—¿Por qué se ha ido María tan de repente? ¿Lo sabe usted? —Era esto lo que Mme. de Vionnet tenía que preguntar.

—Me temo que no puedo darle sino la sencilla explicación que me dio ella en una nota: la súbita necesidad de reunirse, en el sur, con una amiga enferma que había empeorado.

—Ah, ¿entonces le ha escrito a usted?

—No desde que partió; y no fue sino una breve explicación antes de que se marchara. Fui a verla —dijo Strether— veinticuatro horas después de visitarla a usted, pero ya había salido y el portero me dijo que tenía orden de decirme, si aparecía, que ella me había escrito. En efecto, encontré el billete cuando llegué a casa.

Mme. de Vionnet escuchaba con interés y con los ojos fijos en la faz de Strether; entonces, su cabeza delicadamente ornada, hizo un leve ademán melancólico.

— A *mí* no me escribió. Fui a verla —añadió— casi inmediatamente después de hablar con usted, como le prometí que haría cuando la vi en casa de Gloriani. No me había dicho entonces que fuera a ausentarse y me pareció, ya en su puerta, comprender. Se ha ido, con todos mis respetos por su amiga enferma, aunque sé de cierto que tiene muchos, así que no puedo verla. No quiere que nos volvamos a ver. Bueno —continuó con hermosa dulzura premeditada—, me gustaba y la admiraba más que a nadie antiguamente, y ella lo sabía; quizá se ha marchado precisamente por esto; aunque es posible que tampoco la haya perdido para siempre. —Strether seguía sin decir nada; sintió pánico, mientras pensaba en sí mismo en aquel momento, a verse envuelto en problemas de mujeres, aunque, la verdad sea dicha, llevaba ya mucho trecho recorrido en ese sentido; además, vino a ocurrírsele, había algo, era patente, detrás de aquellas alusiones y declaraciones que, de encararlo, le habría puesto enfermo con su afán de simplificar. Era como si, pese a todo, la dulzura y la tristeza femeninas fueran sinceras para él. No dejó de experimentarlo cuando la mujer reanudó lo comenzado—: Me alegro infinitamente de su felicidad. —Aunque también esto le mantuvo en silencio, por más que de tales palabras se dedujera una imputación sutil y mordaz. Lo que se deducía era que *él* era la felicidad de Maria Gostrey y durante la última fracción de segundo había sentido el impulso de recusar la idea. Habría podido hacerlo, sin embargo, diciendo tan sólo: «¿Qué cree usted que hay entre nosotros?», pero un momento después se alegró sorprendentemente de no haber abierto la boca. Algún día se le motejaría más de estúpido que de fatuo y se negó asimismo, con ligero encogimiento interior, a considerar lo que las mujeres —en particular las de los estadios superiores del prototipo— pudieran pensar las unas de

las otras. Buscara lo que buscase, no se trataba precisamente de aquello; de modo que no tomó en cuenta lo que su interlocutora había dejado caer. Sin embargo, aunque se había alejado de ella durante unos días y colocado sobre los hombros femeninos el peso de un futuro encuentro, no evidenciaba la mujer el menor signo de irritación.

—Bueno, ¿qué hay de Jeanne? —dijo ella sonriendo, con la alegría con que había hecho acto de presencia. Y el hombre intuyó, en aquel preciso momento, que había sido el auténtico mensajero de la mujer. Pero él la había enseñado, a propósito de una verdad, a decir mucho a cambio del poco masculino—. ¿Ha averiguado ya si se ha formado una opinión? Me refiero a la señora Newsome.

Casi resentido, Strether no pudo por menos de replicar al instante.

—¿Cómo voy a averiguar esas cosas?

La mujer no perdió por ello la buena disposición.

—Ah, pues son detallitos preciosos y usted, no finja, sabe enterarse de todo. ¿No ha hablado —preguntó— usted con ella?

—Sí, pero no a propósito de Chad. Por lo menos no mucho.

—Oh, usted no necesita «mucho» —afirmó la mujer con decisión. Pero cambió de tercio en el acto—. Espero recuerde su promesa del otro día.

—¿«Salvarla» a usted, según dijo usted misma?

—Y lo sigo diciendo. ¿Lo hará? —insistió—. ¿No se ha arrepentido?

El hombre titubeó.

—No... pero he estado pensando en lo que yo quiero.

La mujer se sorprendió.

—¿Y no, ni siquiera un poco, en lo que quiero *yo?*

— No... eso no es necesario. Basta con que sepa lo que me interesa a mí.

—¿Y no lo sabe —preguntó ella— todavía?

El hombre hizo una pausa.

—Pienso que debe dejarlo en mis manos. Aunque, ¿cuánto tiempo —añadió— me concede usted?

—Me parece más que es cuestión de cuánto tiempo me concede usted *a mí.* ¿No me tiene nuestro amigo, en cualquier caso —prosiguió—, siempre presente ante usted?

—No —respondió Strether— en el sentido de que me hable siempre de usted.

—¿No lo hace nunca?

—Nunca.

La mujer caviló y, si de verdad le había desconcertado el hecho, se guardó de revelarlo. Un segundo después, la verdad sea dicha, se había recuperado ya.

—No, no lo haría. Pero *¿lo* necesita usted?

El hincapié femenino fue asombroso y si bien los ojos del hombre se habían mantenido errabundos, en aquel momento se posaron largamente en la mujer.

—Comprendo por dónde va usted[11].

La exclamación de triunfo de la mujer fue moderada, y, a decir verdad, tenía matices que arrancaban lágrimas a la justicia.

—Tengo ante mis propios ojos lo que él debe a usted.

—Admita, pues, que ya es algo —dijo ella, siempre, no obstante, con el mismo orgullo sometido a la discreción.

El hombre asimiló el detalle, pero prosiguió de todas formas.

—Sé lo que piensa usted de él, pero lo que no sé es cómo diablos se las ha apañado.

—¡Ah, esa es otra cuestión! —dijo ella sonriendo—. Lo importante es de qué sirve que usted se niegue a conocerme cuando conocer al señor Newsome, ya que me concede usted el honor de haberle descubierto, no es ni más ni menos que conocerme a mí.

—Entiendo —murmuró él, sin apartar los ojos de la mujer—. No debería haberla visto a usted esta noche.

La mujer alzó y dejó caer las manos juntas.

—No tiene importancia. Si yo confío en usted, ¿por qué no puede confiar usted en mí un poco? ¿Y por qué no puede confiar usted además —preguntó en otro tono— en usted mismo? —Pero no dio tiempo al hombre para replicar—. ¡Oh, no seré dura con usted! De todos modos, me alegro de que haya hablado con mi hija.

—Yo también —dijo el hombre—; pero ella no le es de ninguna utilidad.

—¿De ninguna utilidad? —Mme. de Vionnet le miró con despejo—. Bueno, pero si es un ángel del cielo.

—Por eso precisamente. Déjela sola. No haga nada por averiguarlo. Me refiero —se explicó— a lo que

usted me dijo a propósito de... sus sentimientos.

Su compañera estaba sorprendida.

—¿Porque no se puede, en realidad?

—Bueno, porque yo le pido a usted, como un favor personal, que no lo haga. Es la joven más encantadora que he visto en mi vida. Por lo tanto, no influya en ella. No sepa nada, no quiera saber. Además... sí, además no lo hará usted.

Se trataba de una apelación repentina y ella la tomó como tal.

—¿Como un favor personal?

—Bueno... usted me lo pidió.

—Todo, todo lo que usted quiera —dijo la mujer sonriendo—. Nunca sabré nada. Gracias —añadió con amabilidad característica mientras se despedía.

El eco de aquellas palabras le acompañó durante un rato, dándole la diáfana sensación de haber sufrido una caída tras haber estado volando. Con el solo hecho de preparar con ella la independencia masculina el hombre, bajo el peso de una percepción particular, sin consistencia, con estupidez supina, se había comprometido, y la mujer, con su sensible sutileza, allí mismo, para tomar ventaja, había incrustado, mediante una sola palabra, un alfiler de oro, cuya aguda finalidad intuía significativamente el hombre. No se había puesto a divagar, antes bien permanecía muy alerta, y sus ojos, mientras consideraba, con intensidad relativa, la antedicha circunstancia, tropezaron con otro par que se habían situado en su radio de acción y que le pareció reflejaban su opinión de lo que había hecho. Los reconoció al instante como los del pequeño Bilham, que, según parecía, se le había acercado con el fin de hablar con él, aunque el pequeño Bilham no era, dadas las circunstancias, la persona a quien más habría abierto su corazón. Un minuto después estaban sentados en un rincón de la sala, opuesto en diagonal al rincón en que Gloriani charlaba todavía con Jeanne de Vionnet, a la que se había prestado, al principio y en silencio, una benévola atención.

—No alcanzo a comprender —había observado Strether entonces— cómo un joven de cierta vitalidad, usted, por ejemplo, puede tolerar la presencia de esa damisela sin sentirse tocado en lo más profundo. ¿Por qué no se decide usted, querido Bilham? —Recordaba el tono que le había traicionado en el banco del jardín, durante la recepción del escultor, y se le antojaba que lo dicho tal vez fuera lo más apropiado que podía decirse a un joven de valía y cierta experiencia—. Más de un motivo habrá.

—¿Para qué?

—Bueno, para estar aquí.

—¿Ofrecer mi mano y mi fortuna a Mlle. de Vionnet?

—Bueno —preguntó Strether—, ¿qué motivo más encantador podría usted ofrecerles? Es la personita más adorable que he visto en mi vida.

—Cierto, lo es y mucho. Quiero decir que es auténtica. Creo que los rosados pétalos están cerrados en espera de abrirse maravillosamente a su tiempo, es decir, para abrirse en presencia de un gran sol dorado. Por desdicha, yo no soy más que una bujía de a real. ¿Qué oportunidad tendría un pobre artista en medio de tal pradera?

—Oh, es usted bastante bueno —dijo Strether.

—Cierto, soy bastante bueno. Todos somos bastante buenos, me parece, *nous autres,* para todo. Pero ella es *demasiado* buena. He aquí la diferencia. Ni siquiera me tendrían en cuenta.

Strether, repantigado en el diván y todavía encandilado por la joven, cuyos ojos habían vagado en su busca, se puso a fantasear con una vaga sonrisa... Strether, tras haber gozado de la situación presente, como si dijéramos con el ritmo de lo latente, despertó por fin y, a despecho del nuevo material adquirido, meditó las palabras de su compañero.

—¿A quién se refiere usted? ¿A ella y su madre?

—A ella y a su madre. Además, ella tiene un padre, que, aparte de lo que pueda ser, no ha de ser, lo sé con seguridad, indiferente ante las posibilidades de la joven. Por otro lado, está Chad.

Strether se mantuvo en silencio durante unos instantes.

—Ah, pero a él no le interesa ella... quiero decir que no, según parece, a fin de cuentas, en el sentido en que yo hablo. *No* está enamorado de ella.

—No... pero es su mejor amigo; después de su madre. Le tiene un gran cariño. Y tiene una opinión formada acerca de su porvenir.

—¡Bueno, es muy extraño! —observó Strether con un suspiro de propiedad

—Muy extraño, a decir verdad. En ello radica su belleza. ¿No se acerca mucho a la clase de belleza en que usted pensaba —prosiguió el pequeño Bilham— cuando se mostró tan maravilloso e inspirado conmigo el otro día? ¿No me ordenó acaso, con un acento que jamás olvidaré, que, mientras tuviera ocasión para ello, viviera cuanto pudiese? Y que viviera *realmente,* pues a eso sin duda se refería. Bueno, me hizo usted

un favor inapreciable y yo hago lo que puedo. Lo interpreto como una coyuntura.

—¡Yo también! —dijo Strether al cabo de un momento. Pero un instante después hacía una pregunta inconsecuente—: ¿Cómo es que Chad está tan confundido?

—¡Ja, ja, ja! —el pequeño Bilham se dejó caer en los cojines.

Nuestro amigo recordó a la señorita Barrace y volvió a experimentar la sensación de moverse en una neblina de alusiones misteriosas y herméticas. No perdió el hilo, sin embargo.

—Naturalmente, lo comprendo; sólo que la mutación general me corta el respiro de vez en cuando. Chad con voz y voto en el establecimiento del futuro de una condesita... no —afirmó—, ¡hace falta más tiempo! Además, dice usted-prosiguió— que los individuos como usted y yo, de manera inevitable, no tienen la menor posibilidad de ganar. Lo curioso es que Chad no entre en esta clasificación. La situación no lo permite, pero en otra distinta podría quedarse con ella si quisiera.

—Sí, pero sólo porque es rico y porque existe la posibilidad de que sea más rico aún. Lo único en que pensarán es en el renombre o en la fortuna.

—Bueno —dijo Strether—, no tendrá ninguna gran fortuna si sigue como hasta ahora. Tiene que espabilarse.

—¿Es eso —preguntó el pequeño Bilham— lo que le ha contado usted a Mme. de Vionnet?

—No... no le he contado gran cosa. Sin embargo, naturalmente —continuó Strether—, puede sacrificarse si lo prefiere.

El pequeño Bilham hizo una pausa.

—Oh, no es hombre entusiasta de los sacrificios; es decir, tal vez piense que ya ha hecho bastantes.

—Bueno, eso tiene su virtud —dijo su compañero con firmeza.

—Es exactamente —deslizó el joven al cabo de un momento— lo que yo quería decir.

Aquello mantuvo a Strether un rato silencioso.

—Lo he descubierto por mí mismo —dijo entonces—; me he dado cuenta, en realidad, durante la última media hora. En pocas palabras, lo he comprendido por fin; no ocurrió así al principio, cuando usted me habló de ello por vez primera. Ni tampoco cuando me habló Chad por primera vez.

—Oh —dijo el pequeño Bilham—, no me parece que usted me creyera en aquella ocasión.

—Pues sí... lo hice; y también creí a Chad. Habría sido odioso y falto de educación, así como totalmente perverso, no hacerlo. ¿Qué interés tendría usted en engañarme?

El joven vaciló.

—¿Qué interés puedo tener?

—Precisamente. Es *posible* que Chad lo tenga. Pero ¿usted?

—¡Ja, ja, ja! —exclamó el pequeño Bilham.

Aquello, repetición al cabo, es posible que, en tanto que amaneramiento, hubiera irritado un tanto a nuestro amigo; pero sabía, como ya hemos visto, cuál era su lugar y estar a prueba de todo no era sino otra forma de afirmar que quería mantenerse en dicho lugar.

—No podía hacerlo sin tener conocimiento directo de las cosas. Es una mujer considerablemente astuta, brillante y eficaz y, por si esto fuera poco, con un encanto indiscutible: el encanto del que nosotros, sin duda, los que estamos aquí esta noche, sabemos qué pensar. No todas las mujeres astutas, brillantes y eficaces lo tienen. A decir verdad, no es muy frecuente en las mujeres. De modo que aquí estamos. —Strether hablaba como si no se dirigiese exclusivamente al pequeño Bilham—. Entiendo lo que puede ser una relación con una mujer así, lo que puede ser una amistad tan elevada y elegante. Como sea, no puede ser violenta ni vulgar: ésta es la cuestión.

—Sí, ésa es la cuestión —dijo al pequeño Bilham—. No puede ser violenta ni vulgar. Y, alabado sea el cielo, *¡no* lo es! Es, le doy mi palabra, lo más delicado que he visto en mi vida, y también lo más distinguido.

Strether, que estaba a su lado y se echaba hacia atrás cuando el otro se inclinaba, le dirigió una mirada momentánea que llenó un breve intervalo y que le pasó desapercibida. No miraba sino al frente, con absorta dedicación.

—Naturalmente, lo que le ha ayudado —dijo Strether al cabo, pese a todo—, lo que le ha ayudado, naturalmente, es decir, por lo que respecta *a cómo* ha resultado tan fantástico... es cosa que no pretendo entender. He tenido que tomarlo como ha venido. Y ahí es donde lo tenemos.

—¡Ahí es donde lo tenemos! —repitió el pequeño Bilham—. Y es también donde, la verdad sea dicha, la tenemos a ella. Tampoco yo lo comprendo, ni siquiera con mi más vasta y próxima oportunidad. Pero soy como usted —añadió—; soy capaz de admirar y regocijarme aunque esté un tanto en la oscuridad. Sabe usted que he estado al tanto durante unos tres años y sobre todo durante el pasado. No era antes tan malo como me parece, haber descubierto que usted piensa...

—¡Pero si yo ya no pienso nada! —le interrumpió Strether con impaciencia—. Es decir, nada salvo lo

que sí pienso. Y quiero decir que, al principio, para que ella se fijase en él...

—Tenía que tener mucho atractivo. Oh, sí, tenía mucho atractivo, mucho más, acaso, del que mostraba en su casa. Ya sabe usted, sin embargo —prosiguió el joven con toda desenvoltura—, que había sitio para ella y en él fue donde se colocó. La mujer vio la oportunidad y no la desaprovechó. Por eso me choca tanta delicadeza. Pero, claro, a él le gustó ella primero.

—Naturalmente —dijo Strether.

—Quiero decir que primero se vieron como fuera y en alguna parte, creo que en su casa, allá en Norteamérica, y que ella, sin proponérselo entonces, sacó sus conclusiones. Luego, con tiempo y ocasión, él sacó las suyas; y después de *esto,* ella fue tan mala como él.

Strether comprendió aquello a medias.

—¿Tan «mala»?

—Sí, comenzó a preocuparse... a preocuparse mucho. Sola, en su deplorable situación, una vez que hubo comenzado, se fijó unos intereses. Unos intereses que continúan y que le ayudaron y le siguen ayudando no poco. De modo que todavía se preocupa. De hecho, se preocupa —dijo el pequeño Bilham con gran seriedad— más.

El criterio de Strether de que aquello no era asunto suyo no quedó malparado por la forma en que tomó lo dicho.

—¿Más que él, dice usted? —Con lo que su compañero miró a su alrededor y entonces, durante unos instantes, se miraron a los ojos—. ¿Más que él? —repitió.

El pequeñó Bilham suspendió el habla durante otro espacio de tiempo.

—¿No se lo dirá a nadie?

Strether meditó.

—¿A quién iba a decírselo?

—Bueno, yo suponía que usted informaba regularmente...

—¿A las personas de allá? —le atajó Strether—. Bueno, no les contaré esto.

El joven desvió la mirada por fin.

—En tal caso, ella se preocupa ahora más que él.

—Oh —exclamó Strether de manera extraña.

Pero su compañero añadió en el acto.

—¿No se le había ocurrido, después de todo? Ahí es donde tiene usted que vigilarle.

—Ah, pero yo no tengo que vigilarle.

—¡Oh, caramba! —El pequeño Bilham no dijo nada más. —En cualquier caso no es asunto mío. Quiero decir —explicó Strether— que sólo lo es tenerlo bajo vigilancia. Pareció, sin embargo, que sí era asunto suyo añadir—: Lo que no se puede negar, pese a todo, es que ella le ha salvado.

El pequeño Bilham apenas esperó.

—Pensaba que era eso lo que *usted* tenía que hacer.

Pero Strether tenía preparada la respuesta.

—Hablo, en relación con ella, de los modales y la ética de Chad, de su carácter y su vida. Hablo de él como de una persona con la que tratar, con la que hablar y con la que vivir... como de un animal social.

—¿Y no es así, como un animal social, como usted le quiere?

—Ciertamente; tanto que es como si ella le hubiera salvado *para* nosotros.

—¿Le interesa, en consecuencia —replicó el joven—, salvarla *a ella* para todos ustedes?

—¡Oh, para «todos» nosotros...! —Strether no pudo por menos de reírse de aquello. Cosa que le hizo retroceder, sin embargo, al punto que de veras había querido tocar—. Han aceptado su situación, por difícil que sea. No son libres, ella, por lo menos, no lo es; pero aceptan lo que tienen. Hay amistad, de una especie muy bella, y esto es lo que les fortalece. Son honrados, sensibles y se sostienen el uno al otro. Es ella, sin duda, quien, como usted ha insinuado ya, posee mayor sensibilidad.

El pequeño Bilham pareció preguntarse qué habría insinuado.

—¿Mayor sensibilidad respecto de que son honrados?

—Bueno, respecto de que *ella* lo es y de la fortaleza que de ello brota. Ella le sostiene a *él*... ella lo sostiene todo. Cuando se puede hacer es extraordinario. Es una mujer maravillosa, maravillosa, como dice la señorita Barrace; y él, a su modo, también lo es; sin embargo, en tanto que hombre, a veces puede rebelarse y no advertir que bebe ahí su importancia. Ella se ha limitado a darle un tremendo impulso moral y lo que esto llega a explicar es prodigioso. Por eso hablaba yo antes de coyuntura. Lo es como ninguna otra. —Y Strether, con la cabeza hacia atrás y los ojos en el techo, pareció perderse en la imagen.

Su compañero escuchaba con atención.

—Usted ha sabido decirlo mejor que yo.

—Oh, vamos, es que a usted no le afecta.

El pequeño Biham consideró aquello.

—Me pareció oírle decir que tampoco a usted le afecta.

—Bueno, no me afecta en absoluto en cuanto asunto de Mme. de Vionnet. Pero, como acabamos de ver, ¿para qué he venido, sino para salvarle?

—Sí... para llevárselo.

—Para salvarlo llevándomelo; para ganarlo para *sí mismo,* porque creo que lo mejor es que se haga cargo del negocio... porque pienso que debe hacer inmediatamente, en consecuencia, lo que sea necesario a este fin.

—Bueno —dijo el pequeño Bilham al cabo de un momento—, ya lo ha ganado usted. Piensa, en efecto, que eso es lo mejor. Me lo ha dicho más o menos así hace un par de días.

—¿Y por eso —preguntó Strether— considera usted que está menos preocupado por ella?

—¿Menos por ella que ella por él? Sí, ése es uno de los motivos. Pero han contribuido también otras cosas. ¿No cree usted que un hombre —continuó el pequeño Bilham— *no puede,* dadas las circunstancias, preocuparse tanto como una mujer? Si estuviera en circunstancias distintas, es posible que se preocupase más. Chad —concluyó— tiene un futuro abierto al alcance de la mano.

—¿Habla usted de su futuro financiero?

—No... todo lo contrario; hablo del otro, del futuro de lo que usted con tanta propiedad llama su coyuntura. M. de Vionnet puede vivir eternamente.

—Entonces no pueden casarse.

El joven apenas dudó.

—No poder casarse es lo único seguro que tienen ante sí. Una mujer, una mujer especial, tal vez pueda soportar esa situación; pero ¿podría un hombre?

La respuesta de Strether fue tan rápida que se habría dicho que ya la tenía preparada.

—No sin un elevado ideal de conducta. Pero es que es eso lo que precisamente atribuimos a Chad. Por cierto —murmuró—, ¿disminuiría la tensión del caso si fuera a Norteamérica? ¿No diríamos mejor que la aumentará?

—¡Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente! —exclamó su compañero riendo. Luego, con mayor ímpetu —: ¿Amortiguaría la tortura la distancia? —Y antes de que Strether pudiera replicar—: La cuestión es que Chad debe casarse —exclamó.

Strether pareció pensar un rato en aquello.

—¡Usted habla de tortura, pero no mengua la mía! —dijo. Un segundo después se había incorporado con una pregunta—. ¿Con quién debe casarse?

El pequeño Bilham se puso en pie más despacio.

—Bueno, con alguien con quien *pueda...* con chica del todo irreprochable.

Ambos estaban de pie y juntos, y los ojos de Strether se volvieron otra vez a Jeanne.

—¿Se refiere usted *a ella?*

Su amigo puso de pronto una cara extraña.

—¿Estando enamorado de la madre? No.

—Pero ¿no pensaba usted que no está enamorado de la madre?

Su amigo hizo una nueva pausa.

—Bueno, en cualquier caso no lo está de Jeanne.

—Es posible que no. ¿Cómo *puede* estar enamorado de otra mujer?

—Oh, eso sí lo admito. Pero estar enamorado, ¿sabe?, no se considera aquí —le recordó con amabilidad el pequeño Bilham— condición necesaria, estrictamente hablando, para casarse.

—¿Y qué tortura, por llamarlo de algún modo, puede darse en una mujer así? —Como llevado del interés de sus propios asuntos, Strether había proseguido sin oír las palabras del otro—. ¿Ha transformado a un hombre de manera tan maravillosa para dárselo a otra? —Pareció detenerse en este punto y entonces el pequeño Bilham le miró fijamente—. Cuando las personas intercambian regalos no los echan de menos. — Entonces exclamó como una extravagancia de la que tuviera plena conciencia—: Afrontemos juntos el futuro!

—¿Quiere usted decir que, a fin de cuentas, no tendrá que irse?

—Quiero decir que si él renuncia a ella...

—¿Sí?

—Bueno, que tendría que avergonzarse de sí mismo. —Pero Strether había hablado en un tono que habría podido pasar por carcajada.

Libro séptimo

I

No era la primera vez que había estado solo en la gran iglesia poblada de sombras, como tampoco era la primera de sus entregas, siempre que la situación lo permitía, al benéfico afecto que aquello tenía sobre sus nervios. Había ido a Notre Dame con Waymarsh, había estado allí con la señorita Gostrey, había estado allí con Chad Newsome y había encontrado en el lugar, incluso en compañía, un refugio de tal índole ante la obsesión de su problema que, nuevamente obligado y con mayor fuerza por lo mismo, no había recurrido anormalmente a un expediente que parecía, por el momento, salir al paso de las circunstancias[12]. Sabía bien que era sólo por el momento, pero los buenos momentos —si buenos podía llamárseles— todavía tenían su valor para un hombre que, por entonces, casi casi por desgracia, tenía que vivir al día. Tras haber aprendido tan bien el medio, últimamente había hecho solo el peregrinaje más de una vez, escabulléndose las más de las veces, aprovechando una ocasión inadvertida y sabiendo que no necesitaba hablar de su aventura cuando volviese a reunirse con sus amigos.

Su gran amiga, por cierto, aún estaba fuera y seguía guardando un notable silencio; habían pasado tres semanas y la señorita Gostrey no había vuelto. La mujer le había escrito desde Mentone, admitiendo que el hombre tenía todo el derecho para juzgarla groseramente inconsecuente, y quizá, dada la ocasión, odiosamente desleal; pero pidiéndole paciencia, pidiéndole la postposición de la sentencia y confiando, en pocas palabras, en la generosidad masculina. También para ella, podía asegurárselo, era complicada la vida: más complicada de lo que el hombre habría supuesto; además, le había asegurado, antes de partir, que no se olvidaría totalmente de él cuando volviese. Si, por otro lado, no abrumaba al hombre con cartas, era, sinceramente, porque tenía conciencia del otro gran intercambio a que él tenía que hacer frente. Por su parte, al cabo de una quincena había escrito dos veces para dar a entender que se podía confiar en su generosidad; pero se acordó en ambos casos de los modales epistolarios de la señora Newsome en los momentos en que la señora Newsome eludía el terreno delicado. Había echado tierra a su problema, había hablado de Waymarsh y de la señorita Barrace, del pequeño Bilham y del grupo del otro lado del río, con quienes había vuelto a tomar el té, y había sido sincero, por conveniencia, a propósito de Chad, de Mme. de Vionnet y de Jeanne. Había admitido que seguía viéndoles, que era, decididamente, un impenitente albacea de las premisas de Chad y que la intimidad del joven con ellas era indiscutiblemente grande; pero había tenido sus razones para no describir a la señorita Gostrey sus impresiones de los últimos días. Habría sido decirle demasiado de sí mismo: y era, precisamente, de sí mismo de lo que quería escapar.

Este pequeño forcejeo había surgido, en medida no pequeña, de la misma voluntad que le conducía a Notre Dame; la voluntad de dejar que las cosas fueran por sí solas, de darles tiempo para justificarse a sí propias, o, por lo menos, de que sucedieran. Sabía que no tenía más misión en aquel sitio que el deseo de no estar, en aquellos momentos, en otros lugares precisos; una sensación de seguridad, de simplificación, cuya necesidad, cada vez que la sentía, se le antojaba divertido una concesión privada a la cobardía. La gran iglesia carecía de altar donde él pudiera rendir culto, carecía de palabras para su alma; pero resultaba tranquilizadora incluso a la santidad; pues allí podía sentir, cosa que no le ocurría en ninguna otra parte, que era un hombre sencillo y cansado que se tomaba la fiesta que había ganado. Estaba cansado, pero no era un hombre sencillo: esto era lo digno de compasión y lo problemático del asunto; sin embargo, era capaz de dejar sus problemas en la puerta como si se tratase de la moneda que habría arrojado a la caja del mendigo ciego del umbral. Recorría la nave central, larga y sombría, se sentaba en el magnífico coro, se detenía ante las apelotonadas capillas del este y el soberbio monumento le hacía presa de su hechizo. Habría podido ser del mismo modo un estudiante seducido por el encanto de un museo, cosa que era exactamente lo que, en una ciudad extranjera y en el otoño de la vida, le habría gustado ser con entera libertad. Esta forma de sacrificio, de todos modos, servía, para el caso, tan bien como cualquier otra; le hacía comprender con claridad que, dentro del recinto, para un auténtico refugiado, las cosas del mundo podían perder su sentido, Aquí radicaba la cobardía, sin duda: en eludir dichas cosas, en escamotear la cuestión, en no abordarla a la peligrosa luz exterior; pero sus olvidos eran demasiado breves, demasiado vanos para herir a otro que a sí mismo y sentía una vaga y fantasiosa generosidad hacia las personas que veía, con su misterio y su ansiedad, y a quienes, con entretenida observación, calificaba de perseguidos a causa de la justicia. La justicia estaba fuera, en la luz peligrosa, y también la injusticia; pero la una estaba tan ausente como la otra en el ambiente de las largas naves laterales y la riqueza de los altares sin número.

Así las cosas, ocurrió que una mañana, unos doce días después de la cena en el Boulevard Malesherbes en que Mme. de Vionnet había estado presente con su hija, se sintió movido a participar en un encuentro que excitó su imaginación profundamente. Tenía la costumbre, en aquellas contemplaciones, de observar a otros visitantes a respetable distancia y tomar nota circunstancial de las conductas, las penitencias, la

postración y el estado de los absueltos y consolados; era ésta la manera en que se abría paso su abstracta ternura, el grado de manifestación a que ésta, naturalmente, se había limitado. A decir verdad, no había sentido tanto su responsabilidad como cuando, en la presente ocasión, hubo de ponerse el hombre a calcular el sugestivo efecto de una dama cuya absoluta inmovilidad en la oscuridad de una capilla vino a advertir un par de veces mientras seguía y repetía su lento itinerario. No estaba arrodillada, ni siquiera ligeramente inclinada, pero sí extrañamente inmóvil, y su prolongada inmovilidad parecía dar cuenta, cuando el hombre llegó y se detuvo, de la entrega absoluta a la necesidad, fuera cual fuese, que la había llevado allí. Estaba sentada y con la mirada fija en el frente, como él mismo solía hacer; pero se había situado, cosa que él nunca había hecho, directamente ante el altar y se encontraba en un estado de abstracción, según advirtió el hombre sin esfuerzo, que para sí hubiera querido. No era una extranjera de paso, que escondiera más de lo que enseñaba, sino uno de los conocidos, los íntimos, los afortunados, para quienes aquellas transacciones tenían un método y un sentido. Recordaba a nuestro amigo —puesto que era la forma en que el noventa por cien de sus impresiones normales le servía de señuelo de cosas imaginadas— a una elegante, decidida y absorta heroína de una historia antigua, algo de lo que había oído hablar, que había leído, algo que, de haber tenido habilidad para el teatro, habría podido escribir, redoblando su valentía y limpidez, en espléndida meditación recogida. La mujer le daba la espalda, pero la impresión masculina exigía que fuera una mujer joven e interesante y que, además, mantuviera la cabeza, incluso en aquella sagrada penumbra, con identificable fe en sí misma, en un sesgo de convicción suficiente, de seguridad e impunidad. Aunque, ¿a qué había ido allí una mujer como aquella, si no había ido a rezar? La lectura que Strether hacía de los elementos presentes era, admitámoslo, confusa; pero se preguntaba si la actitud femenina sería lógico resultado de la absolución, de la «indulgencia». No sabía muy bien lo que la indulgencia, en un lugar como aquél, podía significar; pero tenía, en virtud de una vaga percepción, cierta idea de lo que podía contribuir al entusiasmo de los ritos prácticos. Mucho era para haberse advertido en una figura imprecisa que no significaba nada para él; pero, último detalle antes de abandonar la iglesia, recibiría la sorpresa de una precipitación más intensa todavía.

Había tomado asiento en mitad de la nave y, otra vez con la sensación de quien visita un museo, con la cabeza echada hacia atrás y los ojos fijos en las alturas, intentaba reconstruir un pasado, por decirlo en apropiados términos de Victor Hugo, a quien, hacía pocos días, entregando las riendas por una vez a la alegría de la vida, había comprado en setenta volúmenes encuadernados, una auténtica ganga, por el precio, según le había asegurado el librero, de uno solamente. Sin duda parecía, mientras enfocaba con sus eternos quevedos las tinieblas góticas, totalmente anegado en el respeto; pero contra lo que su pensamiento había acabado por chocar era contra la cuestión de dónde, en medio de tanta acumulación, encajaría cuña tan multiforme. ¿Serían los sesenta volúmenes en rojo y oro lo que, a modo de resumen, le quedaría para enseñar en Woollett como resultado de su misión? En esta posibilidad estuvo pensando un minuto, es decir, estuvo pensando en ella hasta que le pareció advertir que alguien, inadvertidamente, se había acercado a él y se había detenido. Se dio la vuelta y vio que a su espalda había una dama que parecía querer saludarle y se puso en pie de un salto cuando se dio cuenta de que se trataba de Mme. de Vionnet, que al parecer le había reconocido al pasar junto a él, camino de la puerta. Comprobó la mujer en el hombre, con rapidez y alegría, cierta confusión, corrió a atajarla y la despejó con gran habilidad; la confusión consistía en que el hombre había descubierto que ella era la dama que había estado observando hacía un rato. Ella era la indefinida figura de la capilla en sombras; había ocupado el tiempo masculino más de lo que suponía la mujer; pero se le ocurrió de pronto, afortunadamente, que no tenía ninguna necesidad de contárselo y que, a fin de cuentas, no había cometido ninguna falta. A decir verdad, la mujer dio a entender que aquel encuentro era el más feliz de los sucesos que tuvo para él un «¿También usted viene aquí?» que despojó a la sorpresa de toda singularidad.

—Yo lo hago a menudo —dijo ella—; me encanta este lugar; pero por regla general soy implacable con las iglesias. Las ancianas que viven en ellas, me conocen todas; en realidad soy una de esas ancianas. Preveo que terminaré así. —Tras buscar una silla con la mirada, lo que motivó que el hombre le acercase una, la mujer tomó asiento al tiempo que lo hacía el hombre, esta vez alegando—: Oh, me alegra tanto que a usted le guste también...

Confesó el hombre el alcance de su sentimiento, aunque la mujer dejó el tema en cierta vaguedad; le chocó la discreción, el tacto de dicha vaguedad, que no hizo sino corroborarle el instinto por las cosas hermosas. Sabía él cuánto estaba afectada esta sensación por un no sé qué de templado y prudente en la forma en que se había acicalado para su misión particular y su paseo matutino, pues creía el hombre que la mujer había ido a pie; la forma en que se había colocado el velo, ligeramente grueso: apenas un detalle, pero muy significativo; la compuesta severidad del vestido, en que, donde por todas partes el tono burdeos parecía destellar por entre el negro; la encantadora discreción de la cabeza, pequeña y firme; la calma nota, mientras permanecía sentada, de sus manos unidas y calzadas con guantes grises. Era, al sentir de Strether,

como si la mujer estuviera en su propia casa, cuyos brillantes honores le estuviera rindiendo ella, ante una puerta abierta, con toda desenvoltura, mientras toda la vastedad y el misterio de la propiedad quedaran detrás. Cuando las personas se sentían tan seguras llegaban a ser extraordinariamente educadas; y nuestro amigo, tuvo, ciertamente, en aquel momento, una especie de revelación del patrimonio femenino. Según el hombre, el romanticismo de la mujer superaba todo cuanto ésta hubiera podido conjeturar y nuevamente encontró un pequeño consuelo en la convicción de que, por sutil que ella fuera, la impresión masculina seguiría siendo un secreto para ella. Lo que, una vez más, le hizo sentirse inquieto respecto de los secretos en general era la particular paciencia que la mujer podía tener con el deseo masculino de color; aunque la intranquilidad no pudo por menos de desaparecer luego en diez minutos totalmente faltos de color y llenos de solicitud.

El momento, por cierto, ya había extraído su tinte más profundo del especial interés que le había provocado la identidad de su compañera con la persona cuya actitud ante el glorioso altar tanto le había impresionado. Dicha actitud casaba admirablemente con la imagen que se había forjado de su relación con Chad la última vez que los viera juntos. Aquélla le ayudó a permanecer en el punto ya alcanzado; era allí, había resuelto, donde permanecería, pero en modo alguno transigiendo con las facilidades. Irrebatiblemente inocente tenía que ser una relación que tan llevadera se volvía para una de las partes afectadas. Si no era inocente, ¿por qué frecuentaba las iglesias? La mujer que él creía comprender nunca habría entrado en ninguna para jactarse de una culpabilidad insolente. Las frecuentaba en busca continua de ayuda, de fortaleza, de paz: sublime apoyo que, tal podía decirse, encontraba todos los días. Hablaron, en tono intrascendente y con prolongadas miradas, del gran monumento, de su historia y su belleza, cosas todas, afirmaba Mme. de Vionnet, en que meditaba mejor desde fuera.

—Cuando salgamos —dijo ella—, podemos ver el exterior, si no tiene usted inconveniente. No tengo prisa y me encantaría verlo otra vez con usted.

El hombre vino a hablarle del gran novelista y de la gran novela, y de lo que, según suponía, habían hecho por el conjunto, mencionándose además la enormidad de su compra, los setenta asombrosos volúmenes totalmente desproporcionados.

—¿Respecto de qué?

—Bueno, respecto de cualquier otra resolución. —No obstante, intuía, mientras hablaba incluso, hasta qué punto estaba, en aquel preciso instante, tomando una resolución. Había puesto orden en su cabeza y estaba impaciente por salir; pues su objeto tenía que hacerse público fuera y tenía miedo de que, en virtud de cualquier retraso, pudiera escapársele. La mujer, sin embargo, se tomaba su tiempo; no tenía prisa por terminar la tranquila charla, como si deseara aprovechar al máximo aquel encuentro, y esto, a decir verdad, confirmaba la versión de sus modales, de su misterio. Cuando abordó, como habría dicho el hombre, la cuestión de Victor Hugo, su voz misma, el ligero y suave temblor de su diferencia hacia la solemnidad que les rodeaba, pareció dotar a sus palabras de un sentido que no estaba manifiesto. Ayuda, fortaleza, paz, apoyo sublime: no había encontrado tantos que la cantidad no fuera sensiblemente mayor en lo tocante a la fe masculina en la mujer que ella pudiera advertir. Muchos detalles juntos tenían su importancia y si él despertaba el interés femenino por casualidad, como si se tratase de un objeto sólido que ella pudiese aferrar, él no se desligaría voluntariamente del asimiento. Cuando se está en dificultades se sujeta uno a lo que tiene más cerca y era posible que, a fin de cuentas, no estuviese él más allá de los medios más abstractos del consuelo. En este sentido había puesto en orden su cabeza; la había puesto en orden, naturalmente, para dar una señal a la mujer. La señal seria-aunque se trataba de un asunto de ella— que él comprendía; la señal sería que —aunque seguía siendo un asunto de ella— tenía entera libertad para proceder al asimiento. Puesto que ella le tomaba por un objeto sólido —por más que a veces creyese ser movedizo—, haría lo posible por serlo.

Conclusión de esto fue que, media hora después, estaban sentados, para tomar una comida temprana, en una maravillosa y deliciosa casa de recreo de la orilla izquierda: un lugar de peregrinaje para el avispado, como bien sabían ambos, para el avispado que acudía, a causa del gran renombre del sitio, homenaje de los días inquietos, de la otra punta de la ciudad. Strether había estado allí otras veces, la primera con la señorita Gostrey, después con Chad y luego otra vez con Chad, Waymarsh y el pequeño Bilham, a todos los cuales había entretenido él con gran sagacidad; el placer que le embargaba en la presente circunstancia era mayor, pues sabía que Mme. de Vionnet aún no había sido iniciada. Cuando le había dicho, mientras rodeaban la iglesia, junto al río, poniendo en práctica la resolución que había tomado dentro, «¿Le importaría, si tiene tiempo, venir a *déjeuner* conmigo a cualquier parte? Por ejemplo, a un sitio que tal vez conozca, está a un paso, al otro lado del río...» y acto seguido había mencionado el nombre; cuando él hubo hecho esto, la mujer se había detenido en seco, como con repentina necesidad y sin embargo profunda dificultad para responder. La mujer había aceptado la propuesta casi casi como si fuera demasiado encantadora para ser cierta; y es posible que su compañero no hubiera sentido un momento de

orgullo tan inesperado —tan extraño y delicado era el casocomo aquel en que se vio capaz de ofrecer a una persona de tan universal predicamento un nuevo y raro solaz. Había oído hablar ella de tan afortunado lugar, pero, en respuesta a una pesquisa ulterior, había preguntado al hombre cómo podía pensar que ella hubiera estado allí. Había supuesto el hombre que había imaginado que Chad la habría llevado, cosa en cuya cuenta cayó la mujer en seguida, para no pequeño disgusto del hombre.

—Ah, permítame explicarle —dijo ella sonriendo—, que yo no me dejo ver con él en público; no dispongo de tales oportunidades, ni de ninguna otra especie, y es precisamente la clase de cosas que, tranquila criatura que vive en su madriguera, adoro.

Había sido muy amable el hombre al haber pensado en ello, aunque, francamente, si él le hubiera preguntado si ella tenía tiempo, ella le habría dicho que ni un solo minuto. Cosa que, sin embargo, carecía ya de importancia, pues ella iba a dar la espalda a todo. En su casa le esperaba toda clase de deberes: el doméstico, el materno, el social; pero se trataba de un caso de primera necesidad. Sus asuntos se vendrían abajo; pero ¿acaso no se tenía derecho a su pizca de escándalo cuando se estaba dispuesto a pagarlo? Fue sobre esa agradable base de caro desorden, por consiguiente, como acabaron sentados a una pequeña mesa, junto a una ventana que daba al agitado muelle y el resplandeciente Sena, lleno de barcazas; donde, en materia de darse rienda suelta, de sumergirse hasta el fondo, Strether había de sentir que había tocado fondo. Había de experimentar muchas cosas en la presente ocasión, y una de las primeras fue que había corrido mucho desde cierta noche, en Londres, delante del teatro, cuando la cena compartida con María Gostrey, entre las bujías de rosados resplandores, le había parecido necesitada de tantas explicaciones. Las había encontrado, las explicaciones, en aquella ocasión, y las había atesorado; pero en la situación presente era como si las hubiera superado o hubiera quedado por debajo de ellas: no habría sabido decirlo; sin saber por qué, no alcanzaba a pensar en ninguna que no pareciera volverle más halagüeños la inminencia del derrumbe y el cinismo que la lucidez. ¿Cómo podía desear que quedara claro para los demás, para cualquiera, que él, en aquel momento, consideraba motivo suficiente la alegre, limpia y ordenada vida de la orilla que entraba por la ventana abierta o la sencilla forma con que Mme. de Vionnet, del otro lado del mantel impecablemente blanco, de sus sendas *omelettes aux tomates,* la botella de Chablis de color pajizo, le daba las gracias casi por todo con una sonrisa infantil, mientras sus ojos grises se movían al ritmo de sus palabras, se prendaban del cálido aire primaveral, en que ya despuntaba el primer verano, y volvían a continuación a posarse en los ojos masculinos y en sus temas humanos?

Los temas humanos se multiplicaron y ramificaron más de lo que la libérrima fantasía de nuestro amigo hubiera previsto. La sensación que le había dominado antes, la sensación que había tenido con insistencia, la sensación de que la situación le arrastraba no había sido nunca tan intensa; tanto más cuanto que, con conocimiento de causa, podía poner el dedo en la llaga. El accidente no había tenido más remedio que acaecer, la otra noche, tras la cena de Chad; había acaecido, como bien sabía, en el momento de interponerse entre la dama con que estaba y su hija, en el momento en que había accedido de tal modo a discutir con ella un asunto estrechamente relacionado con todos ellos que la sutileza femenina, con su significativo «¡Gracias!» había inclinado la balanza al instante en favor de la mujer. El se había distanciado durante díez días, pero la situación se había desarrollado sola a pesar de ello; ya que el hecho acuciante era precisamente *por qué* se había distanciado. Lo que se le había ocurrido al reconocerla en la nave central de la iglesia era que la distancia no podía por menos de equivaler a una derrota desde el momento en que la mujer no se servía sólo de su sutileza, sino también de la misma mano del destino. Si todos los accidentes habían de ponerse de parte de ella —y amenazaban con seguir haciéndolo con generosidad— la única salida del hombre era rendirse. No otra cosa había hecho al decidirse a proponerle que comiera con él. ¿Qué había sido el feliz término de su propuesta sino el choque en que suelen dar por lo general las escapadas? El choque había sido el paseo y era la comida, la tortilla, el Chablis, el lugar, el paisaje, la conversación y el placer de la conversación: por no hablar, maravilla de maravillas, de la mujer. En este sentido y en ningún otro, por tanto, fue beneficiosa la rendición. Iluminaba con suficiencia, cuando menos, la insensatez del distanciamiento. Antiguos proverbios se reproducían, si mal no recordaba, en el tono de sus palabras, en el tintineo de los vasos, en el rumor de la ciudad y los chapoteos del río. Saltaba a la vista que era mejor sufrir como oveja que como cordero. Igual se moría por la espada que por hambre.

—¿Sigue fuera María? —fue lo primero que ella le había preguntado; y cuando el hombre hubo reunido la franqueza para ser desenfadado al respecto, a pesar del sentido que él sabía atribuía ella a la ausencia de la señorita Gostrey, la mujer prosiguió con la pregunta de si el hombre no la echaba muchísimo de menos. Había razones para dudarlo, pero él, pese a todo respondió que «muchísimo»; cosa que se tomó ella como si hubiera sido lo que había querido demostrar. Y acto seguido—: Un hombre preocupado lo está siempre, como fuere, a causa de una mujer —dijo—; si ella no aparece por un lado, aparece por el otro.

—¿Por qué dice usted que estoy preocupado?

—Ah, porque es la impresión que me da. —Hablaba ella con tanta dulzura, mientras participaba de la

liberalidad masculina, que se habría dicho que temía hacerle daño—. ¿Acaso no está preocupado?

Advirtió él que se ruborizaba ante la pregunta y entonces sintió odio por aquello: sintió odio por pasar por algo tan estúpido como vulnerable. Vulnerable ante la dama de Chad, respecto de la que al principio había sentido tanta indiferencia... ¿había llegado ya a aquel extremo? De manera perversa, mientras tanto, la pausa masculina, empero, dio un extraño aire de verosimilidad a la hipótesis de la mujer; pues ¿cómo se encontraba el hombre, sino desconcertado por haberle causado una impresión que ni remotamente había pensado causar?

—No estoy preocupado todavía —dijo por fin, con una sonrisa—. No estoy preocupado ahora.

—Bueno, yo lo estoy siempre. Pero eso ya lo sabe usted de sobra. —Era una mujer que, entre plato y plato, podía resultar graciosa con los codos en la mesa. Era una postura desconocida para la señora Newsome, pero de lo más llevadero para una *femme du monde*—. Y, sí... yo estoy preocupada «ahora».

—Usted me hizo una pregunta —replicó el hombre— la noche de la cena de Chad. Yo no respondí entonces y ha sido muy delicado de su parte no haber buscado las ocasiones para forzarme al respecto.

La mujer no había perdido el sentido de la perspicacia.

—Sé, desde luego, a qué se refiere. Yo le pregunté qué pretendía al decirme, cuando vino a verme, poco antes de marcharse, que usted me salvaría. Y usted dijo luego, en casa de nuestro amigo, que tendría que esperar para ver por sí mismo lo que pretendía.

—En efecto, yo le pedí tiempo —dijo Strether—. Y, tal como usted lo plantea, parece más bien una ridiculez.

—Oh —murmuró... llena de atenuantes. Entonces se le ocurrió algo más—. Si le parece ridículo, ¿por qué niega usted su preocupación?

—Ah, si la tuviera —replicó el hombre—, el problema no sería el miedo al ridículo. No lo temo.

—¿Qué teme usted?

—Nada... por ahora. —Y se arrellanó en la silla.

—Me encanta su «por ahora» —dijo ella, riéndose de él.

—Bueno, se me ocurre precisamente en este momento que la he protegido a usted durante bastante tiempo. Sé ya, en cualquier caso, lo que quise decir con mis palabras; y, a decir verdad, lo sabía la noche de la cena de Chad.

—Entonces, ¿por qué no me lo dijo?

—Porque era difícil en aquel momento. Yo ya le había prestado un servicio entonces, en el sentido de lo que le había dicho cuando fui a verla; pero no estaba seguro de la importancia que pudiera tener.

La mujer estaba muy impaciente.

—¿Y ahora sí está seguro?

—Sí; y entiendo que, prácticamente, he hecho por usted, es decir, que había hecho por usted cuando me hizo la pregunta, todo cuanto está en mi mano. Y sé ahora-prosiguióque la cuestión puede ir más allá de lo que pensaba. Lo que hice después de visitarla —explicó— fue escribir en seguida a la señora Newsome acerca de usted; espero que su respuesta me llegue uno de estos días. Es esta respuesta lo que me aclarará, según creo, el sentido de las consecuencias.

Hermoso y paciente fue el interés femenino.

—Entiendo... las consecuencias de haber intercedido por mí. —Y esperó, como si no le estuviera acicateando.

El hombre lo admitió continuando en seguida.

—La cuestión era *cómo* la salvaría yo. Bueno, lo intenté diciéndole a ella que la considero a usted digna de ser salvada.

—Comprendo... comprendo. —Y añadió con ansiedad—: ¿Cómo podría agradecérselo? —Como él no pudo decírselo, la mujer añadió—: ¿De veras piensa usted así?

La única respuesta del hombre fue, al principio, servirle de la bandeja que acababan de poner ante ellos.

—Le he escrito otra carta desde entonces... le despejé todas las dudas respecto de lo que yo pensaba. Se lo conté todo sobre usted.

—Gracias... no era para tanto. «Todo sobre» mí —añadió—, sí.

—Todo lo que a mi parecer —dijo Strether— ha hecho usted por él.

—Ah, pudo usted haber añadido todo lo que hay según *mi* parecer. —La mujer volvió a reír, mientras tomaba el cuchillo y el tenedor, como si le regocijasen aquellas puntualizaciones—. Pero usted no está seguro de cómo se lo tomará.

—No. Y no fingiré que lo estoy.

— *Voilà.* -Y dejó transcurrir unos momentos—. Me gustaría que me hablase de ella.

—Oh —dijo Strether con sonrisa ligeramente tirante—, lo único que necesita saber usted es que es una

persona extraordinaria.

Mme. de Vionnet pareció tener algo que objetar.

—¿Es eso todo lo que necesito saber de ella?

Pero Strether hizo caso omiso de la pregunta.

—¿No ha hablado Chad con usted?

—¿De su madre? Sí, mucho... muchísimo. Pero no desde el punto de vista de usted.

—No puede —replicó nuestro amigo— haber dicho nada malo de ella.

—En absoluto. Me ha asegurado, como usted, que es verdaderamente extraordinaria. Pero que sea verdaderamente extraordinaria no parece que sea lo más apropiado para simplificar nuestro caso. Nada más lejos de mí —continuó— que buscar la posibilidad de decir nada contra ella; pero entiendo lo poco que tiene que gustarle que le digan que me debe nada. A ninguna mujer le gusta contraer obligaciones para con otra.

Era aquella una afirmación que Strether no podía contradecir.

—¿De qué otro modo, sin embargo, podía haberle manifestado lo que siento? Es lo primero que había que decir a propósito de usted.

—¿Quiere usted decir que me verá con buenos ojos?

—Es lo que espero para saber. Pero no me cabe la menor duda de que sería así —añadió— si pudiera verla a usted con tranquilidad.

Aquello pareció a la mujer una idea afortunada y fructífera.

—Oh, en tal caso, ¿no podría arreglarse? ¿Vendría ella? ¿Vendría si se lo pidiera usted? ¿Hay alguna posibilidad de que vaya usted? —dijo con ligero estremecimiento.

—Oh, no —respondió el hombre al instante—. Eso no. Sería como justificar su conducta de usted, puesto que es absurdo que sea usted quien haga la visita, que fuera yo primero.

Aquello hizo que la mujer adoptara un aire más preocupado.

—¿Lo cree usted?

—Oh, desde el principio, naturalmente.

—¡Quédese... quédese con nosotros! —exclamó ella entonces—. Es su única forma de estar seguro.

—¿Seguro de qué?

—Bueno, de que él no se desmorone. No vino usted a hacerle eso.

—¿No depende ello —replicó Strether al cabo de unos instantes— de lo que usted entienda por desmoronarse?

El silencio masculino, nuevamente, durante breves instantes, pareció señalar que el hombre comprendía.

—Da usted por supuestas cosas muy notables.

—Sí, las doy... en la medida en que no doy por supuestas las vulgares. Es usted totalmente capaz de comprender que usted no vino a hacer en modo alguno lo que tendría que hacer ahora.

—Ah, es tan sencillo —dijo Strether de buen humor—. Yo no tengo que hacer más que una cosa: plantearle nuestro caso a él. Planteárselo de la única forma en que puede hacerse: aquí, en su propio caldo, convenciéndole. Mi querida señora —prosiguió con claridad—, mi trabajo, como usted puede entender, ya ha terminado y mis razones para quedarme aquí siquiera un día más no son de las mejores. Chad conoce nuestro caso y afirma hacerle plena justicia. Lo que queda es asunto suyo. Yo ya he tenido mi descanso, mi diversión y mi entretenimiento; he pasado, como decimos en Woollett, una temporada encantadora. Y nada me ha parecido más encantador que esta afortunada velada con usted... en esta maravillosa situación que usted ha permitido tan deliciosamente. He saboreado un final feliz. Es lo que quería. Este visto bueno mío es lo que Chad esperaba y presumo que no le afecta en nada que esté dispuesto a irme.

La mujer negó con la cabeza y con delicada y profunda sabiduría.

—Usted no está dispuesto. Si lo está, ¿por qué escribió a la señora Newsome en el sentido que me ha dicho?

Strether pensó en aquello.

—No me iré sin tener noticias suyas. Le tiene usted demasiado miedo —añadió.

Motivó aquello un prolongado cruce de miradas que no arredró a ninguno de los dos.

—No me parece que hable usted en serio... creo que no tengo motivo alguno para temerla.

—Es una mujer de gran generosidad —afirmó Strether entonces.

—Bueno, en tal caso, deje que confíe un poco en mí. Es lo único que pido. Que se dé cuenta, a pesar de todo, de lo que he hecho.

—Ah, recuerde —replicó nuestro amigo— que no podrá darse cuenta sin haberlo visto. Deje que sea Chad quien vaya y le muestre su obra, y permítale suplicar por dicha obra y, en cierto modo, también por *usted.*

La mujer calculó la profundidad de la sugerencia.

—¿Me da usted su palabra de honor de que cuando lo tenga consigo no procurará casarlo por todos los medios?

Aquella pregunta hizo que su compañero volviese a pasear la mirada por el paisaje durante un rato; tras el cual, dijo sin brusquedad:

—Cuando vea por sí misma cómo es él...

Pero ella vino a interrumpirle.

—¿No querrá casarlo sin dilación en cuanto vea por sí misma cómo es él?

La actitud de Strether, la de manifestar una obligada deferencia por lo que ella decía, le permitió dedicarse unos momentos a la comida.

—Dudo que resulte con bien. No será fácil.

—Será fácil si él se queda aquí... y se quedará por el dinero. El dinero parece ser, a título de probabilidad, nauseabundamente cuantioso.

—Bueno —concluyó Strether entonces—, lo único que *puede* molestar a usted es que él se case.

La mujer lanzó una extraña carcajada cristalina.

—Dejemos a un lado lo que puede molestarle a él.

Pero su amigo la miró como si también hubiera pensado en aquello.

—Naturalmente, surgirá el problema del futuro que usted le ofrece.

La mujer se había echado hacia atrás, pero le miraba fijamente.

—Bueno, ¡pues que surja!

—La cuestión es que a Chad le conviene encarar el asunto. Su hostilidad al matrimonio pondrá de manifiesto el parecer de ella.

—Sí, *si* es hostil —dijo ella, aceptando la suposición—. Pero, por lo que a mí respecta —añadió—, lo interesante es lo que *usted* opina.

—Ah, yo no opino nada. No es asunto mío.

—Le pido mil perdones. Ocurre que, puesto que usted lo ha aceptado y se ha comprometido con él, se vuelve enormemente suyo. Usted no me salva, intuyo, por su interés en mí, sino por su interés en su amigo. Lo uno, que yo sepa, depende totalmente de lo otro. No puede usted no comprenderme —concluyó— porque, francamente, no puede usted dejar de comprenderle a *él*.

Extraña y hermosa era para él la tranquila y suave agudeza de la mujer. Lo que más le conmovía era que, en realidad, ella fuera tan profundamente seria. No tenía ninguna de sus formas portentosas, pero de todos modos el hombre nunca había estado en contacto, tal le pareció, con un espíritu cuyas más leves palpitaciones fueran tan pletóricas. La señora Newsome, Dios lo sabía, era seria; pero en sentido diferente. Y bien que lo comprendía.

—No —murmuró—, no puedo, honradamente, no comprenderle a él.

El rostro femenino se le antojó dotado de una exquisita luminosidad.

—¿Lo hará entonces?

—Lo haré.

En esto, la mujer echó la silla atrás y se puso en pie.

—¡Gracias! —dijo con la mano extendida hacia el otro lado, de la mesa y con no menos significado en las palabras que en los labios tras la cena de Chad. El alfiler de oro que la mujer había incrustado se hundió otro centímetro laigo. Sin embargo, consideraba el hombre que no había hecho sino lo que se había propuesto en la misma ocasión. Mientras la esencia del asunto entraba en movimiento, él se había limitado a mantenerse firme en el lugar en que estaba.

II

Tres días después recibió un comunicado de los Estados Unidos bajo la forma de una tira de papel azul doblado y pegado, no por mediación de sus banqueros, sino entregado en su hotel por un muchacho de uniforme, que, informado por el conserje, se le acercó mientras paseaba por el discreto jardín. Anochecía, pero aún quedaba un buen rato de luz y París se advertía más sensible que nunca. El aroma de las flores poblaba las calles; el perfume de las violetas le rondaba continuamente la nariz; y se había hecho a sonidos y sugerencias, vibraciones del aire, humanas e intensas, suponía, como si no se dieran en otros lugares, que le asaltaban cada vez más a medida que la dulzura del atardecer se ensombrecía: un rumor lejano, una nota aguda en el cercano asfalto, una voz que llamaba, que se repetía, en alguna parte, y de tono tan consistente como la de un actor en una obra de teatro. Iba a cenar en casa, como de costumbre, con Waymarsh, según habían establecido por mor de economía y sencillez; y estaba matando el tiempo en espera del amigo.

Leyó el telegrama en el jardín, inmóvil durante un buen rato en el lugar en que lo había abierto y concediéndose cinco minutos más para leerlo atentamente otra vez. Por fin, con rápido gesto, lo arrugó como si fuera a tirarlo; a pesar de lo cual, sin embargo, lo conservó: y lo seguía conservando cuando, después de otro paseo, se dejó caer en una silla colocada junto a una mesa pequeña. Allí, con el pedazo de papel arrugado en la mano y oculto además por los brazos prietamente cruzados, meditó durante un rato, con la mirada fija ante sí, tan fija que Waymarsh apareció y se le acercó sin que lo advirtiera. El recién llegado, a decir verdad, impresionado por el aspecto del amigo, le miró con atención durante un breve momento y entonces, como resuelto a seguir su camino en virtud de alguna lucidez latente, volvió al *salon de lecture* sin dirigirle la palabra. El peregrino de Milrose se permitió, empero, observar la escena por el diáfano ventanal de aquel retiro. Strether acabó por echar un nuevo vistazo a la arrugada misiva, que alisó con cuidado mientras la ponía en la mesa. Así permaneció unos minutos hasta que, al alzar la vista, vio que Waymarsh le observaba desde el interior. Fue entonces cuando ambas miradas se cruzaron: se cruzaron durante un momento durante el que ninguno de los dos se movió. Strether se puso en pie entonces, dobló el telegrama con delicadeza y se lo guardó en el bolsillo del chaleco.

Al cabo de unos minutos los dos amigos estaban sentados para cenar; pero Strether aún no había dicho nada al respecto y acabaron separándose, tras tomar el café en el jardín, sin que ninguno abriera la boca. Nuestro amigo, además, tenía conciencia de que en aquella ocasión habían hablado menos que de costumbre, de modo que había sido como si ambos hubieran estado esperando algo del otro. Waymarsh tenía siempre más o menos el aspecto de sentarse a la puerta de su tienda india y el silencio, tras tantas semanas, había acabado por tener una función en sus encuentros. Este detalle, en el sentir de Strether, había aumentado de intensidad últimamente y fantaseaba aquella noche con que nunca lo habían exasperado tanto. Sucedió, sin embargo, que cerró la puerta a la confidencia cuando su compañero terminó por preguntarle si le ocurría algo en particular.

—Nada —replicó— fuera de lo normal.

Al día siguiente, bien temprano, encontró sin embargo una oportunidad para responder de manera más acorde con los hechos. La situación se había mantenido estanca durante toda la noche anterior, en cuyas primeras horas, después de la cena, ya en su habitación, se había dedicado a escribir una copiosa carta. Se había librado de Waymarsh con esta finalidad, dejándole solo con menos ceremonia que de costumbre, pero al cabo había bajado otra vez con la carta sin terminar y dirigídose a la calle sin preguntar por su camarada. Había dado un largo e inconcreto paseo y la una le había sorprendido antes de volver y dirigirse a su habitación con ayuda de un cabo de vela que se le había dejado en el estante que había ante las dependencias del conserje. Se había apoderado, tras cerrar la puerta, de las cuantiosas cuartillas de su inconclusa epístola y entonces, sin leerlas siquiera, las había roto en pedazos. En consecuencia había dormido —como si se tratara de la bendición por aquel sacrificio— con el sueño de los justos y había prolongado el descanso más allá de lo usual. Ocurrió pues, que, cuando entre las nueve y las diez sonó el golpe de la empuñadura de un bastón contra su puerta, aún no estaba presentable. La brillante y profunda voz de Chad Newsome determinó sin tardanza, empero, la admisión del visitante. El papelito azul de la tarde precedente, objeto tanto más valioso cuanto que había escapado de una destrucción prematura, yacía ahora en el alféizar de la ventana abierta, nuevamente alisado y protegido de las corrientes de aire gracias al excesivo peso del reloj de Strether. Chad, tras mirar a su alrededor con sentido crítico descuidado y competente, como hacía siempre que entraba, lo detectó al instante y se permitió observarlo durante un momento más bien largo. Tras lo cual volvió la mirada a su huésped:

—¿Así que llegó por fin?

Strether se detuvo en seco mientras se ajustaba la corbata.

—¿Lo sabes, entonces...? ¿También tú has recibido uno?

—No, ninguno, y sólo sé lo que veo. Y como lo he visto lo he deducido. Bueno —añadió—, llega tan oportunamente como en el teatro, pues resulta que me he decidido esta misma mañana, aunque habría podido hacerlo ayer, pero me fue imposible; vengo a llevármelo a usted.

—¿A llevarme? —Strether se había vuelto a mirarse en el espejo.

—De vuelta, por fin, como le prometí. Estoy listo: a decir verdad, lo he estado durante todo el mes. Pero me limitaba a esperarle, como era lo correcto. Ya está usted mejor; ahora está a salvo, puedo verlo con claridad; se ha recuperado del todo. Esta mañana rebosa usted salud por los cuatro costados.

Strether, ante el espejo, acabó de vestirse y consultó a aquel testigo añadido a propósito de la última opinión emitida. ¿Parecía sobrenaturalmente sano? Es posible que algo de ello hubiera para el ojo extraordinario de Chad, pero era el caso que, durante horas, él se había sentido más bien destrozado. Un juicio tal, sin embargo, no fue sino un empuje en pro de su resolución; informaba inconscientemente de su prudencia. Al parecer, estaba más firme —puesto que se le advertía como una luz— de lo que se arrogaba. Su firmeza, ciertamente, quedó ligeramente empañada, cuando se volvió para encarar a su amigo, por la

forma en que le miraba este mismo personaje, aunque el caso, desde luego, habría sido peor si el secreto de la magnificencia personal no hubiera estado en todo momento en inagotable posesión de Chad. Y allí estaba él, en medio de su agradable lozanía matutina... fuerte, alegre, con buen aspecto, tranquilo, fragante, insondable, con un color sano, un agradable tono argentino en su pelo juvenilmente abundante y una palabra precisa en los labios que el moreno claro del conjunto destacaban en rojo. Personalmente, a Strether no le había dado nunca tal impresión de triunfo; era como si, en el momento, a pesar de su definitiva derrota, hubiera recompuesto sus pedazos con maña. Tal, de manera chocante y más bien extraña, era la forma en que iba a presentarse en Woollett. Nuestro amigo volvió a dirigirle una mirada de apreciación: siempre lo hacía y sin embargo encontraba siempre que había partes de él que aún estaban por conjuntar, de manera que su imagen parecía transparentarse tras el halo de la niebla de otras cosas.

—He recibido un cablegrama —dijo Strether— de tu madre.

—Estupendo, querido. Espero que esté bien.

Strether titubeó.

—No... no está bien, lamento tener que decírtelo.

—Ah —dijo Chad—, sin duda estoy dotado de un instinto especial. Razón de más para emprender el viaje inmediatamente.

Strether había cogido ya el sombrero, los guantes y el bastón, pero Chad había tomado asiento en el sofá como para indicar dónde quería jugar sus cartas. Observó los objetos de su compañero; es posible que calculara cuánto se tardaría en empaquetarlos. Es posible que incluso deseara insinuar que él mismo enviaría a su criado para ayudarle.

—¿Qué entiendes —preguntó Strether— por «inmediatamente»?

—Oh, un vapor de la semana que viene. Van todos tan vacíos en esta época que será fácil encontrar un camarote en cualquiera.

Strether tenía en la mano el telegrama, que había cogido tras prenderse el reloj, y se lo tendió a Chad, que, sin embargo, con un extraño movimiento, declinó tomarlo.

—Gracias, prefiero no leerlo. Su correspondencia con mi madre es asunto suyo. Yo me limito a estar al margen. —Con lo que Strether, mientras cruzaba una mirada con el otro, dobló lentamente el mensaje y se lo guardó en el bolsillo; hecho lo cual, antes de tomar la palabra, fue atajado por las de Chad—. ¿Ha vuelto la señorita Gostrey?

Pero cuando Strether habló, no fue para responder.

—Por lo que sé, no es que tu madre esté materialmente enferma; su salud, en términos generales, parece haber sido esta primavera mejor que lo normal. Pero está preocupada, está ansiosa y parece haber entrado durante estos últimos días en un estado de crisis. Hemos agotado, entre los dos, su paciencia.

—Oh, *usted* no —protestó Chad generosamente.

—Discúlpame... pero yo sí. —Strether había hablado con suavidad y melancolía, pero también con firmeza. Observó el movimiento capital de su compañero—. Porque se trata particularmente de mí.

—Bueno, mejor me la pone. *Marchons, marchons!* -dijo el joven con alegría. Su anfitrión, sin embargo, no pudo por menos, al oír aquello, de asombrarse sobremanera; un instante después vino a repetir la pregunta formulada poco antes—: ¿Ha vuelto la señorita Gostrey?

—Sí, hace dos días.

—¿La ha visto?

—No... tengo que verla hoy. —Pero Strether no quería entretenerse en aquel momento con la señorita Gostrey—. Tu madre me da un ultimátum. O te llevo conmigo o me voy sin ti; en cualquier caso, he de volver.

—Ah, pero ahora usted me puede llevar consigo —replicó Chad tranquilizadoramente desde el sofá.

Strether titubeó.

—Creo que no te comprendo. ¿Por qué me planteaste con tanta urgencia, hace más de un mes, que Mme. de Vionnet tenía que hablar por ti?

—¿Que «por qué»? —Chad meditó aquello, pero lo tenía en la punta de la lengua—. ¿Por qué, sino porque yo sabía que lo haría muy bien? Fue la mejor manera de que me dejara usted tranquilo y, en este sentido, salió bien. Además —explicó con alegría y tranquilidad—, yo quería que usted la conociera y sacara sus propias conclusiones... no hace falta decirle lo bien que le ha sentado a usted.

—Bueno —dijo Strether—, por la forma en que ella habla por ti, y en la medida en que yo se lo permito, sólo saco la conclusión de que quiere estar contigo. Si esto no te importa nada, entonces no comprendo por qué quisiste que la escuchará.

—Pero, mi querido amigo —exclamó Chad—, ¡me importa muchísimo! ¿Cómo se le ha ocurrido dudar...?

—Dudo solamente porque me vienes esta mañana con tu orden de marcha.

Chad se le quedó mirando y acto seguido lanzó una carcajada.

—¿No es esta orden de marcha lo que usted ha estado esperando?

Strether se debatía; dio una vuelta a la estancia.

—Durante este mes he esperado, creo, más que ninguna otra cosa, el mensaje que acabo de recibir.

—¿Quiere usted decir que se lo ha estado temiendo?

—Bueno, yo resolvía mis asuntos a mi manera. Y me parece que tu pronunciamiento actual —prosiguió Strether— no es el resultado de tu conciencia de lo que yo esperaba. De lo contrario, no me habrías puesto en relación... —Aquí se detuvo e hizo una pausa.

Chad se levantó al oír aquello.

—¡Ah, de modo que el deseo de *ella* de que no me vaya no tiene nada que ver con esto! Sólo que tiene miedo de que, una vez allí, me puedan atrapar. Pero se trata de un temor infundado.

Había vuelto a intercambiar una mirada con la inquisidora de su compañero.

—¿Estás cansado de ella?

Chad le dirigió, a modo de respuesta, y con un movimiento capital, la más extraña sonrisa que había visto dibujada en sus labios.

—Eso nunca.

Palabras que tuvieron, en la imaginación de Strether, un efecto tan profundo y suave que nuestro amigo, por lo pronto, no pudo por menos de tenerlo y mantenerlo presente.

—¿Nunca?

—Nunca —repitió Chad con educación y serenidad.

Lo que hizo que su compañero diera unos cuantos pasos más.

—Entonces, ¿no tienes miedo?

—¿Miedo de irme?

Strether volvió a detenerse.

—Miedo de quedarte.

El joven le miró con gran sorpresa.

—¿Quiere usted ahora que me quede?

—Si yo no embarco en seguida, los Pocock se pondrán en camino inmediatamente. Por eso te dije —dijo Strether— que tu madre me había dado un ultimátum.

Chad manifestó un interés más vivo, pero no más alarmado.

—¿Ha recurrido a Sarah y a Jim?

Strether participó en la imagen durante unos instantes.

—Oh, puedes estar seguro de que también a Mamie. A *ella* es a quien ha recurrido.

Chad no dejó de comprender... y se echó a reír.

—Mamie... ¿para corromperme?

—Oh —dijo Strether—, es muy encantadora.

—Ya me lo ha dicho usted en más de una ocasión. No miento si le digo que me gustaría verla.

Un no sé qué afortunado y sencillo, por encima de todas las inconsciencias, que se contenía en las palabras del joven, hizo ver a su compañero la comodidad de su actitud y lo envidiable de su situación.

—Haz lo posible por verla. Y considera además —añadió Strether— que le harás un favor si permites que venga a verte. Dale un par de meses de París, que no ha visto, si no me equivoco, desde que se casó, y respecto del que estoy seguro no ansía sino un pretexto para visitar.

Chad escuchaba, pero con su conocimiento del mundo por medio.

—Ya lo ha tenido durante todos estos años... pero nunca lo aprovechó.

—¿Te refieres a *ti?* -preguntó Strether al cabo de un momento.

—Por supuesto: el exiliado solitario. ¿A quién se refiere usted? —dijo Chad.

—Oh, a mí. Yo soy su excusa. Es decir, pues viene a ser lo mismo, la de tu madre.

—Entonces —preguntó Chad—, ¿por qué no viene mi madre en persona?

Su amigo lo miró largamente.

—¿Lo preferirías? —Y acto seguido, como el otro no dijera nada—: Nada te impide enviarle un telegrama.

Chad seguía pensando.

—¿Vendría si lo hiciera?

—Es muy posible. Pero hazlo y ya veremos.

—¿Por qué no lo hace *usted?* -preguntó Chad segundos después.

—Porque no quiero.

Chad titubeó.

—¿No quiere que esté aquí?

Strether enfocó aquella cuestión y su respuesta fue de lo más grandilocuente.

—Mi querido muchacho, no me hagas a mí responsable.

—Bueno... comprendo lo que quiere usted decir. No dudo que usted se ha comportado muy bien, pero el caso es que *no* quiere verla. No le tenderé ninguna trampa en este sentido.

—Ah —exclamó Strether—, yo no la calificaría de trampa. Tienes todo el derecho del mundo y sería totalmente comprensible. —A lo que añadió en tono diferente—: Además, tendrías, en la persona de Mme. de Vionnet, una relación muy interesante de cara a ella.

Los ojos de ambos, ante aquella afirmación, no se apartaron y la mirada de Chad, agradable y osada, no se arredró en ningún momento. Se puso en pie, finalmente, y dijo algo que chocó a Strether.

—No la comprendería, pero no importa. A Mme. de Vionnet le gustaría verla. Le gustaría ser amable con ella. Cree que ella podría arreglarlo.

Strether meditó aquello, afectado como se sentía, pero al cabo lo desechó.

—¡No podría!

—Está usted muy seguro —preguntó Chad.

—Bueno, arriésgate si quieres.

Strether, que había dicho estas palabras con serenidad, había deslizado en ellas una súplica que en aquel momento quedó latente en el aire, pero el joven siguió esperando.

—¿Ha respondido usted ya?

—No, todavía no lo he hecho.

—¿Esperaba usted a verme?

—No.

—¿Esperaba solamente —con lo que Chad le dedicó una sonrisa— a ver a la señorita Gostrey?

—No... ni siquiera a la señorita Gostrey. No esperaba a ver a nadie. He esperado hasta este momento mientras tomaba una decisión... en absoluta soledad; y como, naturalmente, tenía que informarte, estaba a punto de salir para hacerlo. Ten por tanto un poco más de paciencia conmigo. Recuerda —prosiguió Strether— que es eso lo que, al principio, *me* pediste que tuviera. La he tenido y ya ves en qué ha redundado. Quédate conmigo.

Chad pareció adoptar una actitud seria.

—¿Hasta cuándo?

—Bueno, hasta que yo te lo diga. Personalmente, ya sabes, en el mejor de los casos, o en el peor de los mismos, no puedo quedarme para siempre. Deja que vengan los Pocock —repitió.

—¿Porque eso le dará a usted tiempo?

—Sí... me dará tiempo.

Chad, como si aquello le desconcertara todavía, aguardó un minuto.

—¿No quiere usted volver con mi madre? —Aún no. No estoy preparado del todo.

—¿Se siente influido —preguntó Chad en tono muy particular— por el encanto de la vida de aquí?

—Mucho —dijo Strether de plano—. Y tú has contribuido tanto a ello que no creo te sorprenda.

—No, no me sorprende, más aún, me complace. Pero —añadió Chad con avezada perspicacia—, ¿a qué le ha llevado todo esto?

El cambio de posición y de relación, en ambos casos, que dó tan manifiesto en aquella pregunta que Chad se echó a reír en cuanto la hubo formulado: cosa que despertó también la carcajada de Strether.

—Bueno, a una certidumbre demostrada, a una certidumbre que ha pasado la prueba del fuego. Pero, oh —no pudo por menos de exclamar—, si tras mi primer mes aquí hubieras querido venirte conmigo...

—¿Sí? —dijo Chad mientras el otro se detenía para meditar lo que pensaba.

—Pues bien: que ahora deberíamos estar ya allí.

—Ah, pero entonces no habría gozado usted.

—Habría gozado durante un mes; y, por si quieres saberlo —añadió Strether—, tengo ya suficiente para el resto de mi vida.

Chad parecía divertido e interesado, de manera oscura, sin embargo, todavía; en parte, tal vez, porque la apreciación de Strether respecto del gozo le había exigido desde el principio buenas dosis de interpretación.

—¿Y si yo le dejara...?

—¿Si me dejaras? —Strether no comprendía.

—Sólo durante un par de meses... el tiempo de ir y volver. Mme. de Vionnet —Chad sonrió— cuidaría de usted mientras tanto.

—¿Volver por tu cuenta mientras yo me quedo? —Durante unos instantes, fue la mirada de ambos la que repitió la pregunta; tras de los cuales, Strether dijo—: ¡Grotesco!

—Pero yo quiero ver a mi madre —replicó Chad entonces—. Recuerde que hace mucho que no la veo.

—Mucho, ciertamente; ni más ni menos que por eso estaba yo al principio tan ávido de que te vinieras conmigo. Pero ¿acaso no nos has demostrado con suficiencia lo bien que te las arreglas sin ello?

—Oh, pero —dijo Chad con asombro— ahora estoy mejor. Hubo en aquello un fácil triunfo que provocó una nueva carcajada en su amigo.

—Oh, si estuvieras peor, yo sabría qué hacer contigo. Creo que, en tal caso, te habría atado y amordazado, y llevado al barco entre pataleos. *¿Cuánto* -preguntó Strether— deseas ver a tu madre?

—¿Cuánto? —Chad pareció encontrar aquello, en realidad, difícil de responder.

—Cuánto.

—Bueno, tanto como usted me eche. Lo daría todo por verla. Además —prosiguió Chad—, usted me ha dejado pocas dudas respecto de lo mucho que *ella* quiere.

Strether meditó durante un minuto.

—Bueno, en tal caso, si las cosas están en tal extremo, coge el vapor francés y embarca mañana mismo. Desde luego, si nos ponemos en eso, eres completamente libre de hacer lo que te plazca. Desde el momento en que no puedes sostenerte y yo no puedo por menos de aceptar tu fuga.

—Partiré ahora mismo, entonces —dijo Chad—, si usted se queda.

—Me quedaré hasta el próximo barco... entonces me iré.

—¿Y llama usted a eso —preguntó Chad— aceptar mi fuga?

—Ciertamente... no puedo llamarlo de otra forma. La única forma de hacer que me quede, en consecuencia —explicó Strether— es que te quedes tú también.

Chad pensó aquello.

—Sobre todo ahora que le he vencido, ¿no?

—¿Que me has vencido? —Strether repitió aquello del modo más inexpresivo.

—Bueno, si ella envía a los Pocock es que ya no confía en usted, y si ella ya no confía en usted, esto significa que... bueno, usted bien lo sabe.

Strether consideró al cabo de un momento que sí lo sabía y, en consecuencia, dijo:

—En tal caso, tienes presente, sobre todo, lo que me debes.

—Bueno, de ser así, ¿cómo podría pagarle?

—No desertando. Quedándote conmigo.

—¡Oh, vamos...! —Pero Chad, mientras bajaban, le puso una mano firme, a modo de garantía, en el hombro. Descendieron juntos muy despacio y, ya en el jardín, reanudaron brevemente la charla, que terminó con su separación. Chad Newsome se fue y Strether, solo, miró a su alrededor, por encima, en busca de Waymarsh. Pero Waymarsh, por lo que parecía, aún no había bajado y nuestro amigo acabó por irse sin haberlo visto.

Libro octavo

I

A las cuatro de aquella misma tarde Strether no había visto aún a su viejo amigo, pero iba, como si se lo hubiera propuesto, a verse hablando de él con la señorita Gostrey. Había estado fuera de casa todo el día, entregado a la ciudad y a sus pensamientos, paseando y meditando, y sentídose al mismo tiempo intranquilo y absorto: todo ello con la actual emoción de un breve y grato recibimiento en el Quartier Marboeuf.

—Waymarsh ha estado, sin yo saberlo, estoy seguro —pues la señorita Gostrey se lo había preguntado — en contacto con Woollett: resultado de lo cual ha sido la imperiosa llamada que recibí anoche.

—¿Recibió usted una carta?

—No, un telegrama que tengo ahora en el bolsillo: un «Vuelva en el primer barco».

La anfitriona de Strether, habría podido deducirse, apenas pudo reprimir un cambio de tinte epitelial. La reflexión llegó oportunamente y estableció una serenidad provisional. Tal vez fue esto lo que la capacitó para decir con notoria doblez:

—¿Y va usted a...?

—Casi se lo merece usted por abandonarme tanto.

La mujer cabeceó como si no valiera la pena hablar de aquello.

—Mi ausencia le ha sido útil, no tengo más que mirarle a usted. Así lo calculé y me siento justificada. No está usted donde estuviera. Y la cuestión —la mujer sonrió— era que yo tampoco estuviera allí. Puede

obrar como guste.

—Oh, pero yo creo ahora —afirmó el hombre con toda tranquilidad— que seguiré necesitándola.

La mujer volvió a admitirle.

—Bueno, prometo no dejarle otra vez, pero será sólo para seguirle. Ya ha tenido su momento y ahora puede caminar solo.

El hombre lo aceptó con inteligencia.

—Sí, supongo que puedo caminar solo. Es esto lo que, en realidad, ha turbado a nuestro amigo. Le he dado tal impresión que ya no lo soporta. Esto no es más que la culminación de sus primeras emociones. Quiere que me vaya; y lo más seguro es que haya escrito a Woollett diciendo que estoy a un paso de la perdición.

—¡Ah, eso está bien! —murmuró ella—. Pero eso no pasa de ser una suposición de su parte.

—He tenido que averiguarlo. Esto lo explica.

—¿Él lo niega... o es que usted no se lo ha preguntado?

—No he tenido tiempo —dijo Strether—. Lo descubrí anoche mismo después de unir los pedazos sueltos y desde entonces no lo he visto.

La mujer recapacitó.

—Pero también está usted disgustado... ¿no confia en usted mismo?

El hombre se ajustó los lentes.

—¿Tengo cara de estar furioso?

—¡Está usted extraordinario!

—No hay motivo —continuó el hombre— para enfadarse. Antes bien, nuestro amigo me ha hecho un favor.

Ella no tardó en averiguarlo.

—¿Por llevar las cosas a un punto decisivo?

—¡Lo ha entendido usted perfectamente! —casi gritó el hombre—. En última instancia, sea como fuere, Waymarsh, cuando tenga unas palabras con él, ni lo negará ni lo atenuará. Se ha comportado según convicciones muy profundas, con la mejor de las intenciones y tras pasar noches en vela. Admitirá que es totalmente responsable y apreciará que le ha salido muy bien; de modo que la discusión que podamos tener no hará sino tender un puente sobre el sombrío abismo que nos ha distanciado. Por fin tendremos, en las consecuencias de su conducta, algo de que hablar con claridad.

La mujer guardó un momento de silencio.

—¡Cuán maravillosamente lo toma usted! Aunque usted siempre es maravilloso.

El hombre hizo una pausa que compaginó con la femenina; hizo entonces, con el humor apropiado, un acto de admisión total.

—Es cierto. Lo soy en extremo en este momento. Quizá debiera decir que soy muy dado a las fantasías y que no me sorprendería estar loco.

—Dígamelo entonces —instó la mujer con interés. Y como él, pese a todo, se mantuviera en silencio, limitándose a devolver la mirada con que ella le observaba, la mujer se preocupó de señalarle el terreno más cómodo—. ¿Qué habrá hecho el señor Waymarsh con exactitud?

—Nada más que escribir una carta. Con una habrá sido suficiente. Les habrá dicho que necesito cuidados.

—¿Y los necesita? —La mujer se moría de interés.

—Muchísimo. Y los tendré.

—¿Dice usted con eso que no va a moverse?

—No voy a moverme.

—¿Lo ha cablegrafiado?

—No. Se lo he encargado a Chad.

—¿Que diga que usted se niega a irse?

—Que *él* se niega. Nos vimos esta mañana y lo convencí. Llegó antes de que yo bajara y me dijo que estaba listo, es decir, listo para partir. Tras diez minutos conmigo, se fue para decir que no se iba.

La señorita Gostrey escuchaba con gran atención.

—¿De modo que usted se lo ha *impedido?*

Strether volvió a arrellanarse en la silla.

—Se lo he impedido. Por el momento —le dijo con mayor viveza— es la postura que mantengo.

—Entiendo, entiendo. Pero ¿cuál es la del señor Newsome? ¿Estaba dispuesto —preguntó— a marcharse?

—Totalmente.

—¿Y creyendo con toda sinceridad que *usted* también lo estaba?

—Supongo que sí; así que se quedó muy sorprendido cuando descubrió que la mano con que le había estado empujando se había convertido de pronto en un mecanismo para inmovilizarle.

Era una forma de ver las cosas que llamó la atención de María Gostrey.

—¿No le pareció una transformación vertiginosa?

—Bueno —dijo Strether—, no estoy muy seguro de lo que piensa. No estoy seguro de nada de cuanto le atañe, salvo que cuanto más lo conozco menos se parece a lo que yo esperaba. Es muy oscuro y por eso he esperado.

La mujer preguntó:

—Pero ¿esperaba algo en particular?

—La respuesta a su telegrama.

—¿Y qué decía su telegrama?

—No lo sé —respondió Strether—; tenía que ser, cuando se despidió, de acuerdo con su propio gusto. Yo me limité a decirle: «Quiero quedarme y la única manera que tengo es que tú también lo hagas». Que quisiera quedarme le impresionó, al parecer, y se condujo en consecuencia.

—¿Luego también quiere quedarse? —preguntó la señorita Gostrey.

—A medias. Es decir, que también quiere irse a medias. La llamada que le hice al principio ha surtido efecto hasta ese punto. Sin embargo —continuó Strether—, no se irá. No, por lo menos, mientras yo esté aquí.

—Pero usted no puede —sugirió su compañera— quedarse siempre aquí. Aunque me gustaría que pudiera.

—Naturalmente. Pero quiero conocerle un poco más. No es en modo alguno el tipo de persona que yo imaginaba; es muy diferente. Y es como tal como me interesa. —Era como si, de manera deliberada y lúcida, expusiera la situación general para su propia inteligencia—. No quiero que renuncie.

La señorita Gostrey sólo quería contribuir a la clarificación masculina. Tenía que ser, sin embargo, delicada y prudente.

—¿Renunciar, dice usted, a su madre?

—Bueno, no pienso en su madre en este momento. Pienso en el plan de que yo he sido portavoz y que, tan pronto nos veamos, le expondré tan persuasivamente como sepa; un plan que se trazó con absoluto desconocimiento de todo lo que, en este último largo período, le ha venido sucediendo. No se tuvo en cuenta ninguna de las impresiones que, aquí, en el lugar mismo de los hechos, comencé a tener inmediatamente al respecto; impresiones que no me cabe duda son todavía incompletas.

La señorita Gostrey le dedicó una sonrisa llena de genial sentido crítico.

—¿De modo que su intención es, más o menos, quedarse por curiosidad?

—Llámelo como le parezca. No me interesan las definiciones...

—¿Mientras está usted aquí? En tal caso, ciertamente que no. Lo considero, de todos modos, una soberbia diversión —afirmó María Gostrey—; y ver cómo termina será una de las mayores emociones de mi vida. ¡Está claro como el agua que l puede caminar por sí solo!

El hombre acogió el tributo sin alharacas.

—No estaré solo cuando lleguen los Pocock.

La mujer arqueó las cejas.

—¿Van a venir los Pocock?

—Es lo que ocurrirá, y ocurrirá en un abrir y cerrar de ojos, en cuanto se reciba el cable de Chad. Se embarcarán y punto. Sarah vendrá para hablar en nombre de su madre... con un resultado bien distinto de *mi* ineficacia.

La señorita Gostrey preguntó con mayor seriedad:

—¿Se lo llevará *ella* entonces?

—Es muy posible... ya veremos. En cualquier caso debe contar con la posibilidad y confiar que hará cuanto esté en su mano.

—¿Y usted *quiere* esa situación?

—Desde luego —dijo Strether—. La quiero. Quiero jugar limpio.

Pero la mujer había perdido el hilo momentáneamente.

—Si el asunto queda en manos de los Pocock, ¿por qué se queda usted?

—Sólo para que se vea que juego limpio... y un poco también, sin duda, para ver que ellos hacen lo propio. —Strether se sentía más lúcido que nunca—. Vine aquí para verme en presencia de hechos nuevos: hechos que se me antojaban cada vez menos conocidos en virtud de nuestros consabidos motivos. La cuestión es bien sencilla. Se necesitaban nuevos motivos, tan nuevos como los hechos mismos; y de esto nuestros amigos de Woollett, de Chad y míos, tuvieron cumplida noticia desde el primer momento. Si son factibles, la señora Pocock hará que se den; hará que se de toda una retahíla. Será —añadió con sonrisa

meditabunda— una parte de la «diversión» que usted hablaba.

La mujer se había introducido ya en la corriente discursiva y flotaba al lado del hombre.

—Será Mamie, por lo que sé a través de usted, quien juegue la carta más fuerte. —Y luego, como el contemplativo silencio masculino no significara una negación, añadió—:

Creo que lo siento por Mamie. 1

—¡Creo que yo también! —dijo Strether, poniéndose en pie y dando un par de pasos bajo la atenta mirada de la mujer—. Pero es inevitable.

—¿Se refiere a su venida?

El hombre explicó a qué se refería tras un par de vueltas.

—La única solución para que no venga es que vaya yo... como creo que, una vez allí, podría evitar. Pero la dificultad al respecto es que si yo voy...

—Entiendo, entiendo. —Había comprendido con facilidad—. El señor Newsome hará lo mismo y en eso —lanzó una carcajada— no hay ni que pensar.

Strether no había participado de la risa femenina; se limitó a mantener una expresión tranquila y relativamente plácida que habría podido ponerle a prueba contra el ridículo.

—Extraño, ¿no?

En aquel asunto que tanto les interesaba habían llegado tan lejos que, como en la presente ocasión, holgaban los nombres: respecto de los cuales, sin embargo, el silencio en que cayeron estaba lleno de conscientes referencias. La pregunta de Strether decía mucho de lo que había pesado sobre él en ausencia de su anfitriona; sólo por este motivo un sencillo gesto de la mujer podía interpretarlo el hombre como vívida respuesta. Respuesta que recibió con mayor claridad cuando dijo la mujer poco después:

—¿Presentará el señor Newsome a su hermana...?

—¿A Mme. de Vionnet? —Strether pronunciaba el nombre por fin—. Me llevaré una enorme sorpresa si no lo hace.

La mujer pareció contemplar la posibilidad.

—¿Quiere decir usted que ha pensado en ello y que está preparado?

—He pensado en ello y estoy preparado.

Fue a su visitante a quien ahora dedicó la mujer su consideración.

— *Bon!* ¡Es usted extraordinario!

—Bueno —respondió el hombre tras una pausa y con cierta fatiga, pero todavía en pie ante ella—, eso es precisamente lo que, por una vez en mi vida carente de lustre, creo que me habría gustado ser.

Dos días más tarde se enteró por boca de Chad del envío de un comunicado procedente de Woollett, en respuesta al decisivo telegrama de los dos hombres; comunicado que se había enviado al mismo Chad y que anunciaba la inmediata partida rumbo a Francia de Sarah, Jim y Mamie. Strether, por su lado y mientras tanto, había cablegrafiado también; había retrasado este acto hasta después de su charla con la señorita Gostrey, charla gracias a la que, como tan a menudo en anteriores ocasiones, sintió que su sentido de las cosas se aclaraba y tomaba las debidas proporciones. Su mensaje a la señora Newsome, en respuesta al de la mujer, había constado de las siguientes palabras: «Juzgo conveniente otro mes, pero no desestimo refuerzos». Había añadido que estaba escribiendo, pero, a decir verdad, lo hacía siempre; era una práctica que, con notable extrañeza, le consolaba, le aproximaba más que ninguna otra cosa a la conciencia de estar haciendo algo; de modo que se preguntaba con frecuencia si, bajo el peso de las recientes tensiones, no habría recurrido a un bálsamo estéril, a una de las artes especiosas de lo ficticio. ¿Habrían sido dignas las páginas que con frecuencia mandaba mediante la estafeta norteamericana, dignas de un periodista vivaz, de un maestro de la gran ciencia nueva de moldear el sentido de las palabras? Pues que se había convertido casi en una costumbre no encontrar ningún placer en la propia lectura, ¿no estaría escribiendo contra reloj y sobre todo para poner de manifiesto su buen carácter? En aquellos renglones aún podía ser liberal, y sin embargo era, en el mejor de los casos, una especie de silbo en la oscuridad. Era innegable, además, que la sensación de encontrarse en la oscuridad le sobrecogía de manera insistente en aquel momento, provocando de esta suerte la necesidad de un silbido más vivo y audible. Había silbado largamente y con fuerza después de enviar su mensaje; había silbado una y otra vez para celebrar las noticias de Chad; se había producido una pausa de quince días durante los que dicho ejercicio le había ayudado. No tenía una idea muy clara de lo que, una vez allí, diría Sarah Pocock, aunque sí disponía de confusas premoniciones; pero no debería tener ocasión de decir, ni ella ni nadie, que él había descuidado a la madre. Había podido escribir antes con mayor libertad, pero nunca lo había hecho tan prolijamente; y con toda franqueza buscaba un motivo, en Woollett, por el que deseara llenar el vacío creado por la partida de Sarah.

El fomento de su oscuridad y la aceleración, me atrevería a decir, de su melodía, radicaban en el hecho de que no se enteraba de casi nada. Durante un tiempo se había dado cuenta de que oía menos que antes, pero que seguía con claridad un curso en virtud del cual lo único que podían hacer las cartas de la señora

Newsome era, lógicamente, interrumpirse. No había escrito una sola linea hacía muchos días y no necesitaba ninguna prueba —aunque, con tiempo, recibiría suficientes— de que ella no había tomado papel y pluma tras recibir la insinuación que había provocado el telegrama femenino. La mujer no escribiría hasta que Sarah le hubiera visto e informado sobre él. Era extraño, aunque acaso lo fuera menos que la conducta masculina en el sentir de Woollett. Era significativo, en cualquier caso, y lo que *era* notable era la mayor intensidad, mediante aquella precisa mengua de manifestaciones, con que se percataba de la naturaleza y modales de su amiga. Le pareció que nunca había vivido tanto con ella como durante aquel período de silencio femenino, un silencio que era mutismo sacro, un medio más elegante y diáfano en que manifestarse la idiosincrasia de la mujer. El paseaba con ella, se sentaba con ella, viajaba con ella y cenaba frente por frente con ella: un raro placer «en tu vida», como apenas habría podido por menos de decir; y si bien nunca la había visto tan callada, no es menos cierto que, por otro lado, jamás había intuido de manera tan elevada, de modo casi austero, la personalidad de la mujer: una personalidad pura y que el vulgo habría calificado de «fría», pero profunda, entregada, delicada, sensible, noble. La energía femenina, en este sentido, convertíase para él, en las situaciones especiales, casi en una obsesión; y aunque la obsesión aceleraba sus latidos vitales, aumentando, a decir verdad, la excitación del tiempo, había horas en que, para reducir el esfuerzo, buscase directamente el olvido. Sabía, respecto de la más extraña de las aventuras —una circunstancia tal que sólo podía tener tal función para Lambert Strether—, que en Paris, más que en ningún otro sitio, estimaría aquel fantasma de la dama de Woollett más importuno que ninguna otra presencia.

Cuando volvió a ver a María Gostrey fue en busca de un cambio. Y sin embargo, a fin de cuentas, el cambio apenas si se dio, pues aquellos días le habló de la señora Newsome como no lo había hecho nunca. Hasta el momento había guardado en este particular cierta discreción y orden; consideraciones que en el presente se vinieron abajo como si las relaciones se hubieran alterado. *En realidad* no se habían alterado tanto, vino a decirse, que hubiera de llegarse a tal extremo; pues si lo que había ocurrido era, naturalmente, que la señora Newsome había dejado de confiar en él, nada había, por otro lado, que probara que él no fuera a ganarse otra vez la confianza de la mujer. Su objetivo presente era revolver Roma con Santiago por conseguirlo; y, a decir verdad, si en aquellos días contaba a Marta cosas que no le había dicho antes, era en muy generosa medida porque tenía presente la idea del honor de la estima de tal mujer. Su relación con María, asimismo, cosa extraña, ya no era del todo, la misma; esta verdad —aunque no demasiado desconcertante— había surgido entre ambos al reanudar sus encuentros. Se contenía de manera cabal en lo que entonces ella había dicho al hombre casi inmediatamente; estaba representada por la observación de que ella no habría necesitado sino diez minutos y que él no había estado preparado para contradecir. Podía caminar solo y la diferencia puesta de manifiesto era extraordinaria. El giro dado por la común conversación había confirmado dicha diferencia con prontitud; la inmensa confianza del hombre en la señora Newsome hizo el resto; y pareció que había pasado mucho tiempo desde que el hombre sostuviera su breve y ávida copa bajo el cántaro femenino. El cántaro femenino apenas si se tocaba ya y otras fuentes habían fluido para él; la mujer no funcionaba sino como un afluente del hombre; y había una extraña dulzura —una suavidad melancólica que afectaba al hombre— en la aceptación femenina del orden alterado.

Se apreciaba en esto, en el sentir del hombre, el correr del tiempo, o, en cualquier caso, lo que le gustaba considerar con simpatía e ironía la celeridad de la experiencia, ya que, como quien dice, había sido el otro día cuando él había estado a los pies de ella, sujeto al vestido femenino y alimentado por la mano de la mujer. Eran las proporciones lo que había cambiado y las proporciones eran siempre, filosofaba nuestro amigo, las condiciones de la percepción, las premisas del pensamiento. Era como si ella, con su pequeño y servicial entresuelo y su vasto conocimiento, sus actividades, sus variedades, sus promiscuidades, sus deberes y dedicaciones que le consumían las nueve décimas partes del tiempo y de las que él acaparaba, cautelosamente, la mejor parte, como si ella, repetimos, se hubiera reducido al papel de elemento secundario y hubiera consentido en la relegación con tacto perfecto. Esta perfección no le había fallado nunca; al principio había sido mayor de lo que él había calculado; le había mantenido al margen, fuera del mercado, como llamaba ella a su gran conocimiento de las cosas, vuelto el común comercio tan sosegado, tan doméstico —cualidad opuesta a la del mercado— que se habría dicho que ella jamás había tenido otro cliente. Había sido maravillosa con él al principio, con el recuerdo del pequeño entresuelo, cuya imagen exploraban los ojos masculinos directamente casi todas las mañanas de entonces; pero ahora ella no era para él sino una parte del abundante conjunto, aunque, desde luego, siempre una persona con la que nunca dejaría de estar en deuda. A decir verdad, nunca le sería dado al hombre inspirar una afición mayor. Ella le había preparado de cara a los demás y en este sentido no veía el hombre que ella pidiera nada a cambio. La mujer se limitaba a meditar, a preguntar, a escuchar y a rendirle el homenaje de una especulación inteligente. Así lo manifestaba ella repetidas veces; él estaba ya muy lejos de ella y ella debía prepararse

para perderle. No había sino una pequeñísima oportunidad para ella.

A menudo, como ella le había dicho, el hombre lo afrontaba —detalle que le encantaba— de la misma forma siempre.

—¿Mi posible fracaso?

—Ni más ni menos... es posible que yo pueda repararlo de manera provisional.

—Oh, si se diera un auténtico fracaso no habrá remedio alguno.

—Pero usted no querrá sucumbir.

—No, no sucumbiré: será peor. Me haré viejo.

—¡Ah, eso es imposible! Lo maravilloso y particular de usted es que se mantiene siempre joven. —La mujer añadía siempre entonces una de esas observaciones que había dejado totalmente de adornar con vacilaciones y excusas, y que, del mismo modo, a pesar de la gran sinceridad de ambos, había dejado de provocar en Strether el menor embarazo. La mujer hacía que el hombre las creyera y en consecuencia se volvían tan impersonales como la verdad misma—. Es precisamente su especial atractivo.

La respuesta masculina, además, era siempre la misma.

—Claro que soy joven... gracias a haber venido a Europa. Comencé a ser joven, o por lo menos a gozar de sus privilegios, desde el momento en que la conocí a usted en Chester; desde entonces ha sido algo de vital importancia. No gocé de los mentados privilegios en el momento oportuno, lo que vale tanto como decir que jamás tuve la cosa en cuestión. Pero los gozo ahora; gocé de ellos cuando el otro día dije a Chad: «Espera»; y volveré a gozarlos cuando llegue Sarah Pocock. Es privilegio que sería para mucha gente un triste espectáculo; y no creo, francamente, que salvo usted y yo supiese nadie lo que siento. No me embriago; no persigo a las mujeres; no derrocho el dinero; ni siquiera escribo sonetos. Pero tengo en la madurez lo que no tuve de joven. Cultivo mi pequeño privilegio a mi propia y pequeña manera. Me divierte más que cuanto me ha sucedido en toda la vida. Pueden decir lo que quieran: es mi rendición, mi tributo, a la juventud. Es algo que se exige cuando se puede: mientras haya vida ya vendrán de donde fuere las condiciones, los sentimientos de los demás. Chad me dio esa sensación, a pesar de su pelo gris, que, en realidad, no hace sino afianzarle, asegurarle y volverle discreto: y con *ella* ocurre lo mismo, a pesar de ser mayor que él, a pesar de su hija casadera, su separación conyugal y su agitada historia. Aunque son bastante jóvenes no quiero decir que estén en la primavera de la vida, ya que esto nada tiene que ver con el asunto. La cuestión es que son míos. Sí, ellos son mi juventud, puesto que, sin saber cómo, en el momento oportuno, no existió nada más. Lo que quiero decir ahora es que todo se irá por la borda, sin cumplir su cometido, si me fallan.

Respecto de lo cual, en aquel preciso instante, preguntó la señorita Gostrey por seguir su costumbre:

—¿A qué llama usted su cometido?

—Bueno, a sacarme del brete mediante esto.

—¿Mediante qué? —A la mujer le encantaba sacárselo todo.

—Pues mediante esta experiencia. —Que era el máximo a donde se llegaba.

Era ella, sin embargo, quien decía la última palabra.

—¿No recuerda que durante los primeros días de nuestra amistad era yo quien tenía que sacarle a usted del brete?

—¿Que si lo recuerdo? Con devoción y ternura. —El hombre siempre lo sacaba a relucir—. Y cumple usted su parte en este momento al permitirme refunfuñar de este modo.

—Ah, no hable como si esa parte fuera pequeña, ya que lo demás le falla...

—¿No lo hará *usted* nunca, nunca... nunca? —Era su forma de sonsacarla—. Oh, le pido perdón. Es necesario, es inevitable que acabe haciéndolo. Su situación, pues a esto me refiero, no me permitirá hacer nada por usted.

—Déjeme sola... comprendo a lo que usted se refiere: que soy aburrida y peligrosamente vieja. Lo soy; pero hay un servicio, que usted puede ofrecer y del que sé que, del mismo modo, se me ocurrirá.

—¿Y cuál será?

Se trataba, en definitiva, de algo que, pese a todo, ella no le diría.

—Sólo lo sabrá si tiene lugar su fracaso. Mientras no venga a cuento, no se lo revelaré —punto en que, por razones propias, dejó el hombre de insistir.

Convino, por lo notorio —era lo más fácil— en que su fracaso no venía a cuento y que esto volvía ociosa la discusión de lo que pudiera seguir. A medida que pasaban los días comenzó a dar una importancia desmedida a la llegada de los Pocock; llegó a tener incluso la vergonzosa sensación de esperarla sin corrección y sinceridad. Se acusaba de creer en provecho propio que la presencia de Sarah, sus impresiones, su juicio se simplificarían y acabarían por armonizar; se acusaba de temer tanto los resultados consecuentes de estos elementos que buscaba refugio, por pura petición de principio, en una furia inútil. De sobra había observado en Norteamérica lo que se solía hacer y en aquel momento carecía del menor apoyo. Su visión

más clara se había dado al descubrir que lo que más deseaba era un informe del estado de ánimo de la señora Newsome más completo e informal que el que esperaba iba a recibir de aquélla. Cálculo que, por lo menos, se daba la mano con el intenso deseo de demostrarse a sí propio que no temía desnudar su conducta. Si había, por lógica inexorable, de pagar por ella, estaba materialmente impaciente por saber el precio; estaba dispuesto a pagar a plazos. El primero sería, justamente, la recepción de Sarah, a consecuencia de la cual, por si fuera poco, conocería él mucho mejor la posición propia.

II

Anduvo más bien solo durante aquellos días, tras haberse simplificado de manera notable sus confusas relaciones con Waymarsh gracias al incidente de la semana anterior. Nada había ocurrido entre ellos en relación con las llamadas de la señora Newsome, salvo que Strether había notificado a su amigo la partida de la embajada actualmente en el mar, dándole así una oportunidad de confesar la oculta intervención que le imputaba. Waymarsh, sin embargo, no confesó nada a la sazón; y aunque esto falsificaba en cierta medida las previsiones de Strether, vio éste en ellas y con desenfado la misma medida de buena conciencia, de la que había surgido al principio la impertinencia del querido amigo. Pero ahora era paciente con el querido amigo y le regocijaba comprobar que, de manera inequívoca, había engordado. Advertía sus propias vacaciones tan dichosamente dilatadas y llenas de libertad que se permitía concesiones y caprichos antes contenidos y encorsetados; su instinto respecto de un espíritu tan reprimido como Waymarsh le llevaba a andar de puntillas por temor de despertarle la noción de una pérdida ya sin remedio. Era todo sumamente divertido, bien lo sabía, y con la única diferencia, como se decía a menudo, de lo que ya sabemos: una emancipación tan, a decir verdad, relativa, que era como el avance que representa el felpudo respecto del limpiabarros. Sin embargo, la presente crisis, por fortuna, se iba a beneficiar del mismo y el peregrino de Milrose se sabría más que nunca en el camino apropiado.

Intuía Strether que cuando supo que los Pocock estaban en camino, el movimiento de simpatía había corrido parejo al de triunfo. Era exactamente por esto por lo que Waymarsh le había mirado con ojos en que el ardor de la justicia aparecía comedido y matizado de sombras. Le había mirado con insistencia, como si estuviera sinceramente triste por el amigo —el amigo de cincuenta y cinco años— cuya frivolidad hubiera de sacarse a relucir de aquella manera; no pronunciando sentencia, sin embargo, sino de manera oscura y dejando que el amigo manifestara la acusación. Era en esta actitud general en que últimamente se había refugiado; al final de la discusión se comportaron con solemnidad y con superficialidad notoria. Strether reconoció en él la agorera meditación a que la señorita Barrace había aludido con tan buen humor como el que señala un rincón del saloncito. Era como si supiera que el paso que había dado se hubiera adivinado de antemano y también como si echara en falta la oportunidad de explicar la pureza de sus motivos. Sería precisamente su pequeña penitencia esta falta de oportunidades; no venía mal a Strether sentirse intranquilo hasta aquel extremo. Si se le hubiera retado o acusado, amonestado por entrometerse o reprendido por lo que fuera, probablemente habría hecho constar, con todo su ser, toda la talla de su consistencia, toda la profundidad de su buena fe. El resentimiento explícito por su conducta le habría hecho salir a la palestra y el golpe de su puño en la mesa le habría consolidado como persona avisada e incorruptible. ¿No era acaso lo que le había dominado hasta el momento sino el temor a dicho golpe, el temor de retroceder ligeramente dolorido ante lo que envidiosamente pudiera poner de manifiesto? No obstante lo dicho, es posible, en cualquir caso, que uno de los síntomas de la situación fuera un visible compás de espera, de parte de Waymarsh. Como si quisiera congraciarse con su camarada por la jugada mediante la que había obrado con previsión, ignoraba a las claras sus movimientos, se apartaba de la pretensión de compartirlos, predisponía su sensibilidad al descuido y, juntando sus grandes manos vacías y agitando sus pies grandes e inquietos, buscaba entretenimiento en otra parte, de manera manifiesta.

Obró esto en pro de la independencia de Strether y, a decir verdad, en ningún otro momento de su estancia allí se había sentido tan libre de hacer lo que quisiera. El estío temprano acicalaba el paisaje y lo emborronaba todo salvo lo próximo. Se convertía en un vasto medio, cálido, fragante, en que los elementos flotaban juntos en buena armonía, en que las retribuciones eran inmediatas y los cálculos se postponían. Chad estaba fuera de la ciudad otra vez, por primera vez desde que su visitante lo viera; había explicado esta necesidad, sin entrar en detalles, pero sin caer en los titubeos; la vicisitud era una de ésas que, en la vida de un joven, dan cuenta de sus múltiples vínculos. A Strether no le preocupaba el hecho más allá de su mera comprobación: imagen grata y abigarrada en que encontraba solaz. Encontraba solaz, por el mismo mecanismo, en el retroceso del péndulo de Chad del otro extremo de la oscilación, el brusco avance hacia Woollett decretado por voluntad propia. Y se entretenía pensando que si en aquel momento hubiera detenido el reloj, habría dado lugar, instantes después, a un movimiento aún más veloz. El mismo, por su

lado, hizo lo que no había hecho nunca; se tomó en un par de ocasiones varios días libres, sin relación ninguna con los pasados con la señorita Gostrey ni los transcurridos en compañía del pequeño Bilham. Fue a Chartres y delante de la fachada de la catedral fomentó una sencilla felicidad general; fue a Fontainebleau y se imaginó camino de Italia; fue a Rouen con una pequeña valija y, en trance de excesos, pasó allí la noche.

Una tarde hizo algo bien diferente; encontrándose en la proximidad de una casa elegante y antigua del otro lado del río, cruzó el gran arco de la entrada y preguntó en la portería por Mme. de Vionnet. Ya había acariciado aquella posibilidad más de una vez, en el curso de fingidos vagabundeos, mientras acechaba cuando mucho al doblar la esquina; sólo que, tras pasar la mañana en Notre Dame, había recuperado perversamente el sentido de su coherencia mientras meditaba y se decidía; por lo que había pensado que el encuentro en cuestión no lo había preparado él y se había afirmado con energía en su postura, consistente ni más ni menos que en alegar que nada tenía que ver con él. Desde el momento en que persiguió con avidez el encanto ligado a su aventura su postura se debilitó, pues entonces actuaba ya de manera interesada. Fue sólo unos cuantos días después cuando se fijó un límite; se prometió a sí mismo que su coherencia terminaría con la llegada de Sarah. Era argumentar correctamente para sentir el derecho a la carta blanca que tal suceso le proporcionaría. Si no le iban a dejar solo, sería un tonto y nada más si se condujese con delicadeza. Si no confiaban en él haría por lo menos lo que más le conviniera. Si iba a estar bajo vigilancia, era libre de probar lo que su postura *pudiera* buenamente depararle. Un rigor ideal quizá postpusiera el pleito hasta que los Pocock hubieran descubierto sus cartas y era a un rigor ideal a lo que había prometido conformarse.

De pronto, sin embargo, aquel día preciso, sintió un miedo especial bajo cuyo peso todo se venía abajo. Supo repentinamente que tenía miedo de sí mismo, aunque no respecto del efecto que sobre su sensibilidad tuviera otra hora con Mme. de Vionnet. Lo que temía era el efecto de una sola hora con Sarah Pocock, que le asaltaba, en las noches agitadas, en medio de pesadillas insomnes. Se le antojaba esta mujer más importante que la vida; aumentaba de volumen a medida que se aproximaba. Le miraba a los ojos e intuía, tras haber hecho lo posible con la imaginación por estar a la altura de las circunstancias, que no podía por menos de sucumbir ante ella; ya ardía, ante el reproche femenino, con el rubor de.la culpa; consentía ya, a modo de penitencia, en el inmediato desahucio de todo. Se imaginaba devuelto a Woollett de la mano de aquella mujer, como los delincuentes juveniles son confiados a los reformatorios. No es, desde luego, que Woollett fuera en realidad un lugar de castigo, pero sabía de antemano que el salón del hotel de Sarah lo sería. Su peligro, en cualquier caso, con tal espíritu de alarma, era una concesión en ese terreno que implicaría una brusca ruptura con el actual; en consecuencia, si esperaba despedirse del mismo acaso perdiera su oportunidad en términos absolutos. Estaba representado con suprema claridad por Mme. de Vionnet y fue ésta, en pocas palabras, la razón por la que no quiso esperar. Había comprendido repentinamente que debía adelantarse a la señora Pocock. En consecuencia, se sintió muy desilusionado al saber por boca de la portera que la dama sobre la que perquiría no estaba en París. Se había ido a pasar unos días en el campo. La circunstancia era de lo más natural y sin embargo produjo en el pobre Strether el derrumbe de toda su confianza. Fue, de pronto, como si nunca hubiera de verla otra vez y como si, además, él se lo hubiera merecido por no haber sido del todo amable con ella.

El feliz resultado de haber dejado en libertad su fantasía en pleno pesimismo fue que las perspectivas, por reacción, comenzaron a despejarse desde el momento en que la embajada de Woollett se apeó en el andén de la estación. Habían llegado directamente de El Havre, tras haber embarcado en Nueva York rumbo a aquel puerto y haber llegado a él, gracias a un viaje afortunado, con una rapidez que dejó a Chad Newsome, que había tenido intención de recibirles en el muelle, rezagado. Había recibido el telegrama, con el aviso de la llegada anticipada, justo en el momento en que iba a tomar el tren para El Havre, de modo que no le quedó otro remedio que esperar en París. Había ido rápidamente en busca de Strether con este objetivo e incluso, con cierto gracejo, había sugerido la presencia de Waymarsh también, de Waymarsh, que, en cuanto tuviera el cabriolé a punto, se encargaría, al mando contemplativo de Strether, de dar un solemne paseo con el tribunal de la familia. Waymarsh había sabido por su compañero, que ya había recibido una nota, entregada a mano, de Chad, que los Pocock estaban al llegar y, de manera ambigua, aunque, como siempre, impresionante, le había mirado con el ceño fruncido, conduciéndose de una menera en que Strether era ya lo bastante experto para advertir su inseguridad, en el lugar apropiado, respecto del mejor tono. El único tono que de veras le gustaba era el tono pletórico, necesariamente difícil a falta de un conocimiento pleno. Los Pocock eran, en cuanto a magnitudes, desmesurados, y en la medida en que era él quien, prácticamente, los había atraído, quedaba por ello mismo al descubierto. Quería pensar con propiedad al respecto, pero sólo alcanzaba, en el mejor de los casos, por el momento, a pensar con vaguedad.

—Bien sabes que recurriré a ti y mucho —había dicho nuestro amigo— para que me ayudes con ellos

—y había sido del todo consciente del efecto de esta observación, y de otras por el estilo, en la sombría sensibilidad de Waymarsh. Había insistido en que le encantaría sobremanera la señora Pocock: no cabía la menor duda; él coincidiría con ella en todo y ella asimismo con *él,* de suerte que la nariz de la señorita Barrace, en pocas palabras, quedaría desplazada.

Strether había tejido esta red de sutilezas mientras esperaban a Chad en el jardín; se había sentado y fumaba un cigarrillo tras otro para calmar los nervios, mientras ante él, enjaulado y leonino, su compañero paseaba y daba vueltas. Chad Newsome había de sorprenderse, sin duda, cuando apareciera, ante el opuesto talante de ambos en aquel momento concreto; recordaría, como parte del mismo, que Waymarsh fue con él y con Strether hasta la calle y que allí se quedaría con una cara entre melancólica y arrepentida. Hablaron de él, los otros dos, mientras se alejaban y Strether puso a Chad en conocimiento de buena cantidad de su grave intuición de las cosas. Días antes le había hecho mención del telegrama que estaba convencido había enviado el amigo común: una confianza que, en el joven, había despertado la curiosidad y la diversión. El resultado del asunto, además, según advirtió Strether, fue conflictivo; esto es, comprendió que Chad juzgaba todo un sistema de influencias en que Waymarsh había tenido un papel determinante: una impresión que había recuperado su urgencia; con el agravante de un hecho tal sobre la concepción que el joven tenía de sus parientes. Mientras comentaban que ahora podían considerar al amigo como un tentáculo de la vigilancia de aquéllos, necesario ya para ejercer ésta desde Woollett, Strether intuyó que media hora más tarde leería en los ojos de Sarah Pocock que él estaba tan «de parte» de Chad como sin duda habría dicho Waymarsh. En aquel momento se desahogaría; no había por qué negarlo; podía ser desesperación, podía ser confianza; se entregaría a los viajeros recién llegados con toda la lucidez que había cultivado.

Repitió a Chad lo que había dicho a Waymarsh en el jardín; que no había duda de que la hermana de aquél encontraría en el último un espíritu afín, que no habría duda de que la alianza, tras un intercambio de pareceres, se consumaría. Serían uña y carne, lo cual, además, no era sino el desarrollo de lo que Strether recordaba haber dicho en una de sus primeras discusiones con su compañero, sorprendido como entonces se había sentido ya a causa de las instancias afines entre este personaje y la señora Newsome.

—Ya le dije, cierto día en que me preguntó acerca de tu madre, que era una mujer que, cuando la conociese, despertaría en él, yo estaba seguro, un particular entusiasmo; lo que casa con la convicción que ahora tenemos: con la certeza de que la señora Pocock se lo llevará consigo en su barco. Pues es el barco de tu madre el que ella maniobra en realidad.

—Ah —exclamó Chad—, mi madre vale cincuenta veces más que Sally.

—Mil veces más; pero, de todos modos, cuando la veas no verás sino a una representación de tu madre: más o menos como yo. Me siento como un embajador cesado —dijo Stretherque va a rendir honores al que viene a sucederle.

Un momento después de hablar como lo había hecho se dio cuenta de que, inadvertidamente, había bajado la categoría de la señora Newsome ante su hijo; una impresión audiblemente reflejada, según pareció a primera vista, en la rápida protesta de Chad. Últimamente había descuidado bastante la apreciación de.la actitud y el carácter del joven, manteniéndose alerta, sobre todo, en la poca preocupación que, en el peor de los casos, manifestaba; y le observaba en aquel momento crítico con remozado interés. Chad había hecho exactamente lo que le había prometido quince días antes: había aceptado sin más su petición de postponer el viaje. Esperaba con elegancia y generosidad, pero también con talante inescrutable y con un ligero fomento, quizás, de la severidad originalmente contenida en el aprendizaje de su elevada educación. No estaba ni nervioso ni deprimido; conservaba la espontaneidad, la agudeza y la resolución: sin precipitaciones, sin frenesíes, sin preocupaciones, sólo, cuando mucho, un poco menos alegre que de costumbre. A Strether se le antojó más que nunca una justificación del extraordinario proceso del que su propio espíritu absurdo había sido escenario; sabía, mientras el coche en que iban seguía rodando, sabía como no había sospechado siquiera que sólo lo que Chad había hecho y había sido le habría conducido a su presente comportamiento. Aquellas cosas le habían hecho ser lo que era y el negocio no había sido sencillo; había costado tiempo y trabajo y, por encima de todo, había tenido un precio. El resultado, en cualquier caso, iba a ofrecerse a Sally; cosa que Strether, en la medida en que aquello le afectaba, se alegraba de estar allí para presenciar. ¿Comprendería ella el resultado o lo entendería como mínimo, o se haría cargo del mismo en última instancia si lo hacía? Se rascó la barbilla mientras se preguntaba cómo, cuando se le preguntase, y estaba seguro de que sería así, se lo expondría a la mujer. Oh, se trababa de conclusiones a las que ella tenía que llegar por sí sola; puesto que deseaba tanto ver, que viera y aprobara. Había partido orgullosa de su competencia, y sin embargo algo le decía a Strether que prácticamente no entendería nada.

Que esto era, además, lo que Chad sospechaba con gran perspicacia quedó claro gracias a lo que oyó decir entonces.

—Son niños; ¡juegan a vivir! —Una exclamación tan significativa como tranquilizadora. Implicaba que él, ante la sensibilidad de su compañero, no había traicionado a la señora Newsome; y propició que nuestro

amigo le preguntase en aquel momento si le parecía bien que la señora Pocock y Mme. de Vionnet se conociesen. Strether se sintió más hondamente impresionado si cabe por la lucidez de Chad—. Bueno, ¿no es a eso a lo que ha venido? ¿A ver de cerca a las compañías con que ando?

—Sí, me temo que sí —respondió Strether de manera espontánea.

La rápida réplica de Chad le hizo comprender su precipitación.

—¿Por qué dice usted que se lo teme?

—Bueno, porque me siento un poco responsable. Es mi testimonio, supongo, el que estará en el fondo de la curiosidad de la señora Pocock. Mis cartas, como desde el principio imaginé que entenderías, han sido sinceras. Y he contado también algunas cosas de Mme. de Vionnet.

Para Chad, todo aquello era extraordinariamente obvio.

—Sí, pero usted sólo puede haber contado cosas maravillosas.

—Como de ninguna otra mujer. Pero es el tono...

—¿El que la ha hecho venir? —dijo Chad—. Es posible, pero no voy a discutir por eso; tampoco lo hará Mme. de Vionnet. ¿No sabe todavía que siente una viva simpatía por usted?

—¡Oh! —exclamó Strether con una punzada de melancolía—. ¡Será por lo que he hecho por ella!

—Ah, ha hecho usted mucho.

La urbanidad le abochornó, impaciente como estaba, en aquel momento, por ver la cara que Sarah Pocock pondría ante una fuerza respecto de la que, a pesar de todas las advertencias del hombre, no llegaría la mujer con ninguna previsión.

—¡Soy yo quien ha hecho *esto!*

—Bueno, la cosa no tiene mayor importancia. A ella le encanta —observó Chad con toda tranquilidad — que simpaticen con ella.

Cosa que permitió reflexionar un instante a su compañero.

—¿Y está segura de que la señora Pocock simpatizará...?

—No, yo me refiero a *usted.* A ella le encanta que usted le guste: a nadie, entiéndame —dijo Chad riendo—, le amarga un dulce. Sin embargo no se desespera por Sarah tampoco y está preparada para lo que sea.

—¿Por el lado del reconocimiento?

—Sí, y de todos los demás. Por el lado de la amabilidad general, la hospitalidad y la buena acogida. Tiene listas las armas —Chad volvió a reír—; está preparada.

Strether comprendió. Entonces, como si en el aire resonase un eco de las palabras de la señorita Barrace—:

—Es maravillosa.

—No se imagina usted hasta qué punto.

Había un fondo en aquello, según creyó oír Strether, de lujo inveterado, casi una suerte de inconsciente descaro propietario; pero el efecto de este vislumbre no iba a precipitar, por el momento, niguna especulación: tan concluyente había sido aquel dejo de tan graciosa y generosa afirmación. Había sido, a decir verdad, una evocación y la evocación vino a provocar, antes de que transcurriera mucho tiempo, otra consecuencia.

—Bueno, ahora la veré más a menudo. La veré tanto cuanto me plazca, con tu permiso, cosa que hasta el presente no he hecho.

—La culpa —dijo Chad, sin el menor reproche— ha sido sólo de usted. Yo hice lo posible por que congenieran *y ella,* mi querido amigo..., jamás la he visto tan encantadora con ningún otro hombre. Pero a usted no le ha faltado inspiración.

—Sí, es cierto —murmuró Strether, mientras pensaba de qué modo le había dominado y hasta qué extremo había perdido en aquel momento su autoridad. No habría sabido seguirle el rastro hasta el final, pero todo se debía a la señora Pocock. Es posible que la señora Pocock estuviera en aquella situación a causa de la señora Newsome, pero estaba aún por demostrar. Lo que le dominaba era la sensación de haber perdido estúpidamente la oportunidad de ganar donde las ganancias habrían sido sustanciosas. Había tenido ocasión de tratarla más a fondo y no hacía otra cosa que desaprovechar los momentos oportunos. Casi de feroz podría calificarse su resolución de no permitir que aquello siguiera sucediendo y reflexionaba fantásticamente, mientras al lado de Chad se aproximaba a su destino, que era Sarah, a fin de cuentas, quien había puesto el dedo en la llaga de sus oportunidades. Lo que su visita de inquisición pudiera bocetar en otro sentido era todavía desconocido; pero no lo era en modo alguno que favorecería en mucho la aproximación de dos personas educadas. No tenía más que escuchar a Chad en aquel momento para advertirlo, pues Chad le estaba remachando que ellos, por supuesto, contaban con él —esto es, el que hablaba y la otra persona educada— en lo tocante a ánimo y apoyo. A Strether le resultaba asombroso oírle hablar como si los límites de la prudencia que ellos habían rebasado fueran a causar no se sabe qué

embeleso a los Pocock. No: si Mme. de Vionnet *lo* conseguía —si Mme. de Vionnet embelesaba a los Pocock —, Mme. de Vionnet sería todo un prodigio de mujer. Sería un hermoso plan de dar resultado y todo se centraba en la posible condición sobornable de Sarah. El precedente de su propio caso ayudó no poco a Strether a considerar que la mujer podía tener aquella salida, ya que estaba claro como el agua que su carácter, más bien, se aseguraría toda posible diferencia. La idea de su propia sobornabilidad le hizo ponerse aparte con el rótulo que indicaba que el suyo era un caso del todo indudable. Siempre le gustaba, respecto de todo lo que afectaba a Lambert Strether, saber lo peor, y lo que ahora sabía al parecer no era sólo que era sobornable, sino que, a decir verdad, había sido efectivamente sobornado. La única dificultad estribaba en que no habría sabido decir a ciencia cierta con qué. Era como si se hubiera vendido, pero sin haber recibido el dinero. Esto era, sin embargo, lo que, de manera característica, *solía* ocurrirle. Era su forma natural de comercio. Mientras pensaba en estas cosas, de todos modos, recordó a Chad la verdad que no debían perder de vista: la verdad, con todos los respetos a la susceptibilidad femenina respecto de sus nuevos intereses, que afirmaba que Sarah tenía que haber partido con un objetivo ambicioso, firme y concreto.

—No ha partido, entiéndeme, para que le tomen el pelo. Es posible que seamos encantadores: quizá no haya nada que nos resulte más fácil; pero no ha venido a que nadie la encante. Ha venido llana y simplemente para llevarte consigo.

—Oh, está bien: me iré con *ella* -dijo Chad de buen humor—. Supongo que usted no tendrá nada que objetar. —Y luego, como, durante un minuto, Strether no dijera nada—: ¿O es que piensa que cuando la haya visto ya no querré irme? —Y como esta pregunta mantuviera a su amigo en silencio, añadió—: Lo que yo pienso es que, en cualquier caso, mientras estén aquí lo pasarán bien.

Fue entonces cuando habló Strether.

—¡Ah, vamos! Me preguntaba si de veras querías irte...

—¿Y bien? —dijo Chad para acabar de enterarse.

—Bueno, que no tienes que preocuparte por lo bien que lo pasemos. No tendría que preocuparte cómo lo vamos a pasar. Chad podía aceptar siempre, de la mejor forma del mundo, una sugerencia ingeniosa.

—Comprendo. Pero ¿qué quiere usted que haga? Soy demasiado simpático.

—¡Sí, demasiado simpático! —Strether suspiró profundamente. Y le pareció que aquello era el absurdo final de su misión.

Vino a contribuir a este efecto eventual el que Chad no diese ninguna respuesta. En cambio, tomó la palabra cuando avistaron la estación.

—¿Tiene intención de presentarle a ella a la señorita Gostrey?

Para aquello Strether tenía pronta respuesta.

—No.

—Pero ¿no me dijo usted que sabían detalles de ella?

—Creo haberte dicho que es tu madre quien los sabe.

—¿Y no habrá puesto en antecedentes a Sally?

—Esa es una de las cosas que quiero comprobar.

—¿Y si averigua usted que sí...?

—¿Quieres decir que entonces haré que se conozcan?

—Exacto —dijo Chad con su grata prontitud—: para demostrarle que no hay nada.

Strether titubeó.

—Me parece que no me preocupa demasiado lo que ella pueda pensar al respecto.

—¿Tampoco si representa lo que piensa mi madre?

—Ah, pero ¿qué es lo que tu madre piensa? —Hubo en esto su pequeño desconcierto.

Pero acababan de llegar y, en cierto modo, el auxilio podía bien, a fin de cuentas, estar a mano.

—¿Acaso no es eso, mi querido amigo, lo que ambos queremos averiguar?

III

Strether salió de la estación, media hora más tarde, en compañía diferente. Chad se había encargado, para dirigirse al hotel, de Sarah, Mamie, la doncella y el equipaje, todo ello cómodamente instalado; sólo después de que los cuatro se hubieran alejado subió su compañero a un coche de alquiler junto con Jim. Un nuevo y extraño sentimiento dominaba a Strether, a consecuencia del cual se había fortalecido su ánimo; era como si lo que había ocurrido al apearse los viajeros hubiera sido algo distinto de cuanto temiera, aunque no había temido precisamente ninguna escena inmediata de violencia. Su impresión no había ido

más allá de lo inevitable, se dijo; sin embargo, la seguridad y el sosiego le embargaban con dulzura. Nada tan extraño como estar en deuda por tales cosas con expresiones de rostros y el sonido de voces que le habían acompañado hasta la saciedad, durante años, que habría podido decir; pero ahora sabía, del mismo modo, lo intranquilo que había estado; lo sabía a carta cabal gracias a la presente sensación de prórroga. Lo había captado, además, de un solo vistazo; lo había entrevisto en la sonrisa con que Sarah, a quien, en la ventanilla del compartimento habían saludado ellos con efusión desde el andén, hubo de esbozarles momentos después, bella y lozana en su plácida incursión estival por el país de las maravillas. No fue sino un indicio, pero fue suficiente; iba a ser cordial y discreta, iba a jugar una partida muy larga: como fue más que evidente, cuando, deshaciendo el abrazo de Chad, saludó directamente al valioso amigo de la familia.

Strether era entonces, y más que nunca, el valioso amigo de la familia; pasara lo que pasase, era algo que podía seguir siendo; y su forma de responder expresó, incluso para sí mismo, lo poco que le había gustado la perspectiva de dejar de interpretar dicho papel. Para él Sarah siempre había sido cordial: de hecho, raras veces la había visto tímida o seca; su bien dibujada sonrisa, de labios delgados, intensa sin deslumbrar y tan espontánea como el chispazo de un fósforo en el papel de lija; la protuberancia de su más bien larga barbilla, que en su caso representaba invitación y urbanidad, y no, como en muchos otros, atrevimiento y desafio; el claro alcance de su voz; la decisión e impecabilidad generales de sus maneras; eran, en conjunto, elementos que el trato le había vuelto familiares, pero que en la circunstancia presente le daban la sensación de que acababa de conocerla. Aquel primer vislumbre de la mujer le había proporcionado una breve pero clara revelación de su semejanza con su madre; habría podido tomarla por la señora Newsome cuando sus miradas se cruzaron mientras el tren entraba en la estación. Fue una sensación que desapareció al instante; la señora Newsome era mucho más hermosa y mientras que Sarah tendía a la voluminosidad, su madre tenía, a pesar de su edad, todavía el talle de una niña; la barbilla de ésta, por otro lado, era más corta y su sonrisa, por fortuna, mucho más —oh, mucho, muchísimo más— sosegadamente breve. Strether había visto reservada a la señora Newsome; había oído, materialmente, su silencio; pero jamás la había conocido en son desagradable. Y si bien a la señora Pocock sí la había conocido en son desagradable, no podía decirse que la hubiera visto falta de afabilidad. Poseía formas de afabilidad que eran en grado sumo afirmativas; nada, por ejemplo, había sido más chocante que el hecho de que fuera afable con Jim.

Lo que, en cualquier caso, había distinguido en la ventanilla del tren era la frente alta y despejada de la mujer: aquella frente en que sus amigos, por alguna razón, siempre pensaban como en un «ceño»; el prolongado rabillo de los ojos, que hubo de chocarle tanto en aquella coyuntura que le hizo pensar extrañamente en los ojos de Waymarsh: y el brillo insólito de su pelo oscuro, acicalado y tocado con sombrero, según el refinado ejemplo de su madre, con tal recato respecto a los extremos que en Woollett siempre se referían a ello como a «propio de ellas». Aunque estas asociaciones desaparecieron en cuanto In mujer estuvo en el andén, habían durado lo suficiente para hacerle sentir todos los ingredientes de su alivio. La mujer que se había quedado, la mujer a la que estaba unido, había estado ante él el tiempo suficiente para señalarle otra vez la medida de la infamia, de la vergüenza, a decir verdad, de verse obligados a reconocer la formación de una «grieta» entre ambos. El hombre había enfocado esta medida con concentración y soledad; pero la catástrofe, mientras Sarah se empeñaba, buscaba sus escasos segundos tan insólitos como temibles, o demostraba ser, más exactamente, del todo inimaginable; de modo que su hallazgo de algo familiar e intrascendente con que responder trajo consigo una momentánea resurrección de la fidelidad masculina. De pronto había tocado fondo y se había quedado boquiabierto ante la idea de lo que tal vez había perdido.

Bueno, en aquel momento, durante el cuarto de hora de entretenimiento general, pudo mariposear alrededor de los viajeros con tanta inocencia como si el mensaje que habían de darle fuera que no había perdido nada. No haría que Sarah escribiera a su madre aquella misma noche para decirle que estaba alterado o se comportaba de manera extraña. En el curso de un mes había habido muchas ocasiones en que se había notado extraño y alterado de muchas formas, pero éste era asunto suyo. Sabía por lo menos cuál no lo era, y no era, en cualquier caso, una circunstancia en que Sarah pudiese recibir ayuda de sus solas y propias luces. Y aunque dichas luces brillaran más de lo que parecía, no avanzaría mucho la mujer contra la corriente de la mera simpatía. Confiaba el hombre en ser simplemente agradable hasta el final y aunque sólo fuera, por otro lado, por la incapacidad de manifestar nada distinto. Ni siquiera podía manifestarse a sí mismo su transformación y extrañeza. Había tenido lugar —el proceso— en algún sitio muy profundo. María Gostrey había captado retazos del mismo. Pero ¿cómo iba a sacarlo, aunque se lo propusiera, para la señora Pocock? Este era el espíritu, pues, en que se agitaba y con la más predispuesta palpitación debida en gran parte, además, a la impresión, inmediatamente percibida, de que Mamie era una guapa chica a la que no podía ponerse el menor reparo. Se había preguntado vagamente, al rozar multitud de cosas en el temblor de sus pensamientos, si Mamie sería tan guapa como Woollett pregonaba; a propósito de lo cual, el efecto

de verla otra vez iba a quedar aplastado por la opinión de Woollett hasta tal extremo que el resultado, en realidad, liberó en la imaginación un alud de otros semejantes. Hubo de hecho cinco minutos en que fue de necesidad una última palabra para encajar con un Woollett representado por una Mamie. Este era el tipo de verdad que el lugar vivía sin duda; se la estimularía con toda confianza; se la señalaría con espíritu triunfal; se aferrarían a ella con tenacidad; no habría la menor duda de que no habría necesidad que ella no satisfaciera, ni pregunta que no respondiese.

Bueno, Strether se deslizó dulcemente en la delicadeza de convenir en que aquello era cierto. Habida cuenta de que una comunidad podía ser representada del mejor modo posible por una damisela de veintidós años, Mamie interpretaba su papel a la perfección, lo interpretaba como si estuviera acostumbrada a ello y miraba, hablaba y vestía a tono con lo requerido. Strether se preguntó si la muchacha, a la reveladora luz de París —un frío, anegado taller de luz, favorecedor y sin embargo traicionero—, no se mostraría asimismo consciente de estos temas; pero momentos después se sintió satisfecho de que la conciencia femenina estuviera vacía, a fin de cuentas, a pesar de su envergadura, más sencilla que compleja, y de que lo que mejor podía hacerse con ella no era extraer mucho, sino introducir al máximo. Andaba derecha y su estatura era la justa, tal vez un poco pálida quizá, pero con el agradable, manifiesto, conocido lustre qué afirmaba su vitalidad. Podría «recibir» en representación de Woollett dondequiera que se encontrase y había algo en sus modales, su tono, sus movimientos, sus bonitos ojos azules, su hermosa dentadura perfecta y su muy pequeña —demasiado pequeña— nariz que inmediatamente la situaba, en la imaginación, en el centro de una sala cálida y bien iluminada en que se hablaba en voz alta: hasta ese extremo al que se llega en espera de ser «presentado». Todas ellas, las imágenes, estaban allí para felicitarla y la remozada visión de Strether completó la idea en esta clave. Mamie tenía el aspecto de una novia feliz: de la novia cuando sale de la iglesia y un momento antes de marcharse. No era una simple virgen; y sin embargo, por otro lado, no estaba casada ni un ápice más allá. Estaba en la etapa del esplendor, del triunfo, de la fiesta. Muy bien, ¡que durase muchos años!

Strether se alegraba de tales cosas por Chad, que se deshacía en atenciones ante las necesidades de sus amigos, al margen de que hubiera dispuesto que su criado le ayudase. Las señoras, sin lugar a dudas, eran gratas de ver y Mamie sería, en cualquier momento y en cualquier lugar, muy grata de exhibir. Pasaría extraordinariamente por su joven esposa —en luna de miel— si él saliera con ella. Pero esto era asunto de él, o quizá de ella; era algo, en cualquier caso, que ella no podía remediar. Strether recordó cómo le había visto llegar con Jeanne de Vionnet en el jardín de Gloriani y la fantasía que había tenido al respecto —fantasía anieblada en aquel momento, intensamente atribulada por otras— fue, durante aquellos minutos, lo único digno de nota. A menudo, a pesar de sí mismo, se había preguntado si Chad no sería, respecto de Jeanne, objeto de un fuego fijo y enmascarado. Era muy posible que la criatura estuviera trémulamente enamorada y esta convicción no retrocedió ni un paso a pesar de que le disgustaba pensar en ello, a pesar de ser, en una situación complicada, la más complicada de todas, y a pesar de un no sé qué indescriptible de Mamie, un no sé qué, en cualquier caso, que su intelecto le atribuía sin pestañear, un no sé qué que daba valor a la mujer, le daba intensidad e intenciones como el símbolo de una disconformidad. A decir verdad, la pequeña Jeanne no estaba en modo alguno en cuestión —¿cómo iba a estarlo?—, y sin embargo, desde el momento en que la señorita Pocock se había sacudido la falda en el andén, arreglado los grandes lazos del sombrero instalado propiamente en el hombro la correa del bolso de viaje de tafilete y adornos dorados, desde aquel preciso momento Jeanne fue combatida.

Fue en el coche, con Jim, donde las impresiones se le apelotonaron, causándole la más extraña sensación de ausencia prolongada de las personas entre las que había vivido durante años. Habiendo venido hasta él era como si él hubiera vuelto para encontrarlas y la rara rapidez de la reacción mental de Jim devolvió su propia iniciación al pasado. Se podría o no estar a tono con lo que se diera entre ellos, pero de Jim se habría dicho ciertamente que sí; su percepción inmediata —franca y divertida— de lo que el asunto era para *él* causó gran placer a Strether.

—Mira, es por mi aspecto y si no hubiera sido por ti... —y se interrumpió mientras las hermosas calles corrían al encuentro de su saludable apetito; reanudaría lo comenzado tras un codazo expresivo, con una palmada en la rodilla del compañero y con—: ¡Oh, tú... tú lo has conseguido! —que se sobrecargó de profundo significado.

Strether advirtió en aquello la intención del homenaje, pero, con una curiosidad por lo demás ocupada, pospuso aceptarlo. Lo que se preguntaba en aquel momento era cómo habría juzgado Sarah Pocock, en la oportunidad que ya había tenido, a su hermano, del que él, cuando, por último, en la estación, hubieron de separarse a causa del distinto medio de transporte, había recibido una mirada en la que había leído más de un mensaje. Aunque Sarah estuviese juzgando a su hermano, la conclusión de Chad respecto de su hermana, y:j acerca del marido de ésta y acerca de la hermana del marido de ésta, llevaba, cuando menos, camino de ser severa. Strether intuía la severidad y que, como la mirada antedicha había sido un intercambio, la que él

había devuelto había sido relativamente vaga. Cualquier comparación de detalles, sin embargo, podía esperar; todo se le antojaba dependiente del efecto producido por Chad. Ni Sarah ni Mamie habían dicho, de ninguna de las maneras, en la estación —donde habían estado, después de todo, un buen rato— ni una palabra al respecto; cosa que, para terminar, era lo que nuestro amigo había esperado de Jim en cuanto estuvieron todos juntos. Le parecía curioso que hubiera tenido aquel inofensivo tropiezo con Chad; una irónica inteligencia con el joven a propósito de sus parientes, una inteligencia acontecida ante sus mismísimas narices y, como habría podido decirse a expensas de aquéllos, un asunto de tal jaez volvía a indicarle el número de etapas que había de atravesar; aunque si el número de etapas parecía elevado, el tiempo que exigía la última no pasaba del empleado en un simple gesto. Antes de esto había tenido ocasión de preguntarse si no habría cambiado él del mismo modo que Chad. Claro que en Chad era evidente la mejora... bueno, no tenía ningún nombre a punto para calificar el efecto, en su propio organismo, de su más tímida dosis. Primero había de ver dicho efecto. Y en cuanto a su privado trámite con el joven, a fin de cuentas, la dirección del mismo no poseía mayor extrañeza que el hecho de que la conducta de aquél con los tres viajeros hubiera sido una manifestación tan feliz. Strether le apreciaba por ello sin ser correspondido todavía; esto le afectaba, mientras tanto, como habría podido afectarle una pequeña, agradable y perfecta obra de arte; hasta el punto de preguntarse si ellos valían realmente la pena, lo comprendían y le rendían justicia; hasta el extremo de que casi habría sido un milagro si, allá en consigna, mientras esperaban sus bultos, Sarah le hubiese tirado de la manga y conducido aparte. «Tiene usted razón; ni mi madre ni yo comprendimos muy bien lo que usted quería decirnos, pero ahora lo entendemos. Chad es extraordinario; ¿qué más se puede querer? ¡Si las cosas son *así*... !» Con lo que habrían podido darse un abrazo, pongamos por caso, y puéstose a trabajar juntos.

¡Ah, cuánto, á pesar de toda la continente perspicacia femenina —somera y apenas divertida— habrían trabajado juntos! Strether sabía que se comportaba de manera ilógica; lo achacaba a su nerviosismo; las personas no podían advertirlo todo y hablar de todo en un cuarto de hora. Posiblemente, sin duda, por otro lado, consideraba en demasía la ostentación de Chad. Sin embargo, pese a todo, cuando, al cabo de cinco minutos, en el coche, Jim Pocock tampoco dijo nada —esto es, no dijo lo que Strether quería, aunque hubo de hablar por los codos—, todo quedó, de rebote, repentinamente, en que eran o idiotas o testarudos. Lo más probable, en términos generales, era lo primero, de modo que sería el reverso de la continente perspicacia. Sí, echarían el freno y serían perspicaces; se interesarían al máximo por cuanto tuvieran delante, pero sus observaciones, sin embargo, serían falsas; todo estaría fuera de su alcance; sencillamente, no comprenderían. ¿De qué servía entonces que hubieran venido —si no iban a ser inteligentes hasta *ese* punto—, a menos, claro está, que él estuviera totalmente equivocado y fuera de órbita? ¿Se había dejado seducir, en lo relativo a la mejora de Chad, por la fantasía y estaba lejos de la verdad? ¿Vivía en un mundo falso, un mundo absurdo que se había forjado simplemente para su exclusiva tranquilidad y era su presente irritación —ante, en aquel momento, el silencio de Jim en particular— otra cosa que la alarma de la nulidad amenazada por el contacto de lo real? ¿Era esta contribución de lo real, tal vez,. la misión de los Pocock? ¿Habían acudido para cumplir con el deber de observar, que él había resquebrajado y pulverizado, y para reducir a Chad a los llanos términos en que las almas honradas podían tratar con él? ¿Habían acudido, en pocas palabras, para ser cuerdos donde Strether estaba destinado a creer que sólo había sido insensato?

Contempló tal contingencia, pero no tardó en desvanecerse en cuanto hubo considerado que, en tal caso, habría sido un insensato con María Gostrey y el pequeño Bilham, con Mme. de Vionnet y la pequeña Jeanne, con Lambert Strether, en definitiva y, por encima de todo, con el mismo Chad Newsome. ¿No redundaba más en beneficio de la realidad ser insensato con estas personas que cuerdo con Sarah y Jim? Jim, a decir verdad, estimó en aquel momento, estaba lejos de todo aquello personalmente; a Jim no le importaba; Jim no había venido ni a causa de Chad ni a causa de él; Jim, en pocas palabras, dejaba la parte moral a Sally y se limitaba, la verdad sea dicha, a aprovecharse, con miras al placer, de que casi todo se lo dejaba a Sally. No era nada en comparación con Sally y no tanto en virtud del carácter y la voluntad de Sally como en razón de que la mujer era un tipo más desarrollado y poseía mayor conocimiento del mundo. Prácticamente confesó, con franqueza y serenidad, que le daba la sensación de que su factura andaba muchos kilómetros a la zaga de la de su mujer y muchos más, si cabía, de la de su hermana. Tal naturaleza, bien lo sabía él, se apreciaba y aclamaba, dado que a lo más que podía aspirar socialmente y, para el caso, industrialmente, un importante hombre de negocios de Woollett era una precisa libertad que conjugar con este encanto general.

La impresión que causó aquel hombre en nuestro amigo fue otra de las cosas que señalaron su itinerario. Era una impresión extraña, sobre todo por la rapidez con que se dio; Strether la había recibido y juzgado como mucho en veinte minutos; le pareció, aunque en menor cuantía, fruto de los largos años de Woollett. Pocock, lógica y consentidamente, aunque no del todo a sabiendas, estaba fuera del asunto. A

pesar de su normalidad; a pesar de su delicadeza; a pesar de ser un importante hombre de negocios de Woollett; la determinación de su sino le permitía su normalidad, mientras que todo lo demás se encontraba en la misma situación, en su sentir, con mayor o menor lucidez. Parecía decir que había todo un aspecto de la vida en que lo absolutamente normal era, para los importantes hombres de negocios de Woollett, estar fuera del asunto. Su interés no rebasaba este punto y Strether, por lo que a Jim afectaba, no quería que lo rebasase. Sólo que la imaginación de Strether, como siempre, estaba en marcha y se preguntaba si aquel aspecto de la vida no estaría de algún modo relacionado, a pesar de cuantos figuraban en él, con el hecho del matrimonio. ¿Habría sido su conducta como la de Pocock, de haberse casado diez años atrás? ¿Sería la misma si hubiera de casarse pocos meses después? ¿Se sentiría alguna vez tan desplazado por la señora Newsome como Jim se sentía —de manera relativa— respecto de su mujer?

Dirigir la mirada en aquella dirección vino a darle seguridad; él era distinto de Pocock; se había afirmado de otro modo; se le tenía, a fin de cuentas, mayor estima. Lo que sin embargo se le ocurrió, en aquel momento, fue que la sociedad, la de allá, de que Sarah y Mamie —y, de manera más descollante, la misma señora Newsome— eran especímenes, era esencialmente una sociedad de mujeres y que el pobre Jim no figuraba en ella. El, Lambert Strether, sí figuraba, pese a todo, en cierta medida... lo que era extraña situación para un hombre; pero siguió considerando que, tal vez, si se hubiera casado habría tenido que sacrificar su puesto. La ocasión, a decir verdad, la que la fantasía representase, no fue un momento de sensible exclusión para Jim, que se encontraba en un estado de predisposición manifiesta al encanto de su aventura. Bajito, gordo y chistoso inveterado, de color amarillento y desprovisto de rasgos notables, prácticamente habría pasado inadvertido de no ser por su afición a los trajes gris perla, los sombreros blancos, los cigarros de buen tamaño y casi ninguna mentira, que contribuían a establecer su identidad. Había huellas en él, aunque ninguna dolorosa, de pagar siempre por los demás; y el principal era precisamente aquella frustración tipológica. Con esto era con lo que pagaba, antes que con fatigas y esfuerzos inútiles; y también, sin duda, un poco, con el esfuerzo del humor, nunca irrelevante para las situaciones, para las relaciones, de que estaba rodeado.

No cabía en sí de alegría mientras recorrían las dichosas calles; afirmó que el viaje era un auténtica aventura llovida del cielo y que él no estaba allí —estaba ávido por hacerlo constar— en pos de nada; no sabía muy bien a qué había ido Sally, pero *él* había ido a pasarlo bien. Strether se lo concedió, mientras se preguntaba si Sally querría que su hermano volviese para que fuese igual que su marido. Confiaba en que «pasarlo bien» fuera, de manera absoluta, el programa de todos ellos; y asintió con liberalidad a la propuesta de Jim de que, libres de responsabilidades —los bultos iban en el coche con los demás—, debían dar una vuelta antes de dirigirse al hotel. No era asunto suyo vérselas con Chad, sino de Sally; y como era propio de ella, tal le parecía, abrir fuego en seguida, no estaría mal que se mantuviesen al margen y diesen tiempo a la mujer. Strether, por su lado, sólo pedía que se diese tiempo a la mujer; así que anduvo sin prisas, con su compañero, por paseos y avenidas, haciendo lo posible por extraer del escaso material alguna previsión de su catástrofe. No tardó en advertir que Jim Pocock declinaba hacer juicios, que había soslayado las fronteras de la discusión y la ansiedad, para dejar todos los análisis del asunto en las manos exclusivas de las damas, y no encaminando su actual perspectiva sino hacia un leve y divertido cinismo. Salió a relucir, el cinismo —ya había manifestado algún retazo—, en un apenas diferido:

—Diablo, no me gustaría estar en su pellejo!

—¿Te refieres a que no estarías en el lugar de Chad...?

—Renunciar a esto para volver y dirigir la propaganda.

—El pobre Jim, con los brazos cruzados y sus cortas piernas estiradas en el coche abierto, se sumergía en el resplandeciente mediodía parisino, volviendo los ojos de un lado a otro del paisaje—. Diantre, quiero salir por ahí y vivir. Y quiero vivir mientras esté aquí. Estoy de acuerdo contigo, ¡ah, viejo, qué grande eres y cómo me doy cuenta!, en que no es justo molestar a Chad. *Yo* no quiero juzgarle; honradamente, no podría. En cualquier caso, estoy aquí gracias a ti; te estoy muy agradecido. Sois un par estupendo.

Hubo detalles en estas palabras que Strether, por el momento, dejó pasar.

—¿No te parece importante, entonces, que habría que tomarse en serio la publicidad? Chad *sería,* por lo que toca a capacidad-dijo—, el hombre apropiado.

—¿De dónde ha sacado esa capacidad? —preguntó Jim—. ¿De aquí?

—No la ha sacado de aquí, no, y lo extraordinario es que aquí no la ha perdido, necesariamente. Tiene un instinto natural para los negocios, un cerebro privilegiado. Honradamente hablando —explicó Strether— encaja como anillo al dedo. En este sentido es hijo de su padre y no lo es menos, pues también ella es maravillosa, a su manera, de su madre. El tiene otros gustos y otras inclinaciones, pero la señora Newsome y tu mujer tienen razón cuando exigen lo que exigen. Es un joven notable.

—¡Bueno, ya lo imagino! —dijo Jim Pocock, suspirando con satisfacción—. Pero si tanto crees en su derecho a movilizarnos de esta manera, ¿por qué has prolongado la situación hasta este extremo? ¿No sabes

que hemos estado muy preocupados por ti?

Las preguntas no se habían formulado con formalidad, pero Strether comprendió, sin embargo, que debía elegir y tomó una resolución.

—Entiéndeme, porque me gusta mucho. Me gusta mi París. Quizá demasiado.

—¡Ah, viejo pícaro! —exclamó Jim con alegría.

—Pero las cosas no han terminado —prosiguió Strether—. El caso es más complejo de lo que puede parecer en Woollett.

—¡Oh, pues en Woollett parece un desastre! —manifestó Jim.

—¿Incluso después de haber escrito yo?

Jim se acordaba.

—¿No ha sido tu carta lo que ha hecho que la señora Newsome nos pusiera en el barco? Y por si esto fuera poco, Chad sigue resistiéndose.

Strether reflexionó.

—Comprendo. Que ella hiciera algo era, sin duda, inevitable, y tu mujer, en consecuencia, naturalmente, ha venido a actuar.

—Oh, sí —convino Jim—, a actuar. Pero Sally actúa, ya sabes —añadió con lucidez—, siempre que sale de casa. Nunca sale si no es para actuar. Ahora actúa en nombre de su madre y eso equilibra la balanza. —A lo que añadió, poniendo en ello los cinco sentidos, con una remozada acogida del bello París—: De todos modos, en Woollett no nos había pasado nunca nada igual.

Strether seguía pensando.

—He de decir que me sorprende que hayáis venido con un talante tan lógico y moderado. No sacáis las uñas. Por lo menos no veo en la señora Pocock ningún síntoma. No es tan terrible —añadió—. Soy tan tonto y estoy tan nervioso que me pareció que tenía que serlo.

—Oh, ¿acaso no la conoces lo suficiente —preguntó Pocock— para saber que nunca pisa en falso, lo mismo que su madre? No son mujeres terribles, ninguna de las dos: dejan que uno se confie. Enseñan la piel de cordero, pero por debajo está la de lobo. ¿Acaso no las conoces? —Jim seguía hablando mientras miraba a su alrededor, quitando al tema, según comprendió Strether, toda su importancia—. ¿No las conoces acaso? Son exageradas como nadie.

—Sí —y en la afirmación de Strether hubo una evidente precipitación—, son exageradas como nadie.

—No se rasgan las vestiduras ni sacuden la jaula —dijo Jim, al parecer complacido con la analogía—; y es a la hora de comer cuando parecen más mansas. Pero siempre acaban en lo mismo.

—Es cierto... ¡siempre acaban en lo mismo! —replicó Strether con una carcajada que justificaba su confesión de nerviosismo. Le disgustaba hablar sinceramente de la señora Newsome con Pocock; no le habría importado gran cosa mentir. Pero había algo que quería saber, una necesidad creada por la reciente pausa de la mujer, por haber dado tanto él desde el principio, como ahora más que nunca se le figuraba, y haber recibido tan poco. Era como si se le hubiera encasquillado la notoria verdad de la metáfora del compañero. Ella había sido de lo más mansa a la hora de la comida; se había alimentado, y Sarah con ella, de la gran escudilla de toda su reciente y libre necesidad de comunicación, su alegría y su gozo, su ingenuidad y hasta su locuacidad, mientras que el flujo de la respuesta femenina había sido siempre magro. Jim, mientras tanto, sin embargo, cayó, a decir verdad, en la superficialidad, de manera característica, desde el momento en que dejó hablar desde su experiencia conyugal.

—Desde luego, Chad tiene ahora la ventaja de estar allí con ella. Si no aprovecha la circunstancia al máximo... —Suspiró con piedad contingente ante la posible escasez de recursos de su cuñado—. Contigo sí que la ha aprovechado, ¿eh? —y preguntó momentos después si había algo nuevo en las revistas de variedades, expresión que pronunciaba a la manera norteamericana[13]. Hablaron de las revistas de variedades, manifestando Strether un conocimiento que provocó otra vez en Pocock un juego de insinuaciones tan vago como una canción de cuna, pero tan incisivo como un codazo en el costado; y terminaron el paseo bajo la égida de temas circunstanciales. Strether esperó hasta el final, pero en vano, alguna muestra de que Jim hubiera visto cambiado a Chad; apenas habría sabido explicar la desazón que le produjo la ausencia de este testimonio. Su actitud había partido de aquí, en la medida en que había actitud alguna; y si ahora resultaba que nadie veía nada, había perdido el tiempo. Concedió a su amigo hasta el último momento, hasta que tuvieron el hotel a la vista; pero como el pobre Pocock siguiera entre aplausos, envidias y guasas, comenzó a sentirse a disgusto con él, a considerarlo extravagantemente vulgar. ¡Si al final nadie se daría cuenta!

Strether, mientras pensaba en aquello, sabía que además iba a dejar que Pocock representara para él lo que la señora Newsome no comprendería. No disminuyó el disgusto, en vista de la vulgaridad de Jim, al hablar con él de la dama mencionada; sin embargo, segundos antes de que el coche se detuviera, supo el alcance de su deseo, del verdadero mensaje de Woollett.

—¿Se ha derrumbado, en algún sentido, la señora Newsome?

—¿«Derrumbado»? —repitió Jim, riéndose prácticamente de su sentido del pasado.

—Bajo la tensión de las esperanzas postpuestas, los desengaños repetidos y por tanto acumulados.

—Ah, ¿que si está abatida, dices? —tenía sus propias categorías en la mano—. Bueno, sí, está abatida... como Sally. Pero nunca son tan enérgicas como cuando están abatidas. Ya lo sabes.

—Ah, ¿Sarah está abatida?-murmuró Strethervagamente.

—Cuanto más abatidas, más despiertas.

—¿Y está muy despierta la señora Newsome?

—Toda la noche, querido... por *ti*. -Y Jim, con una risotada un tanto vulgar, le dio un empujón que quitó tensión a la escena. Pero ya tenía lo que quería. Comprendió en el acto que aquel era el verdadero mensaje de Woollett—. ¡De modo que no vuelvas a casa! —añadió Jim mientras bajaba y mientras su amigo, tras dejarle pagar generosamente al cochero, caía en una meditación momentánea. Strether se preguntaba si aquel sería también el verdadero mensaje.

IV

Cuando la puerta del salón de la señora Pocock le permitió pasar al día siguiente, antes del mediodía, oyó una voz encantadora que casi le hizo vacilar antes de cruzar el umbral. Mme. de Vionnet estaba ya en el campo de batalla y este hecho daba al drama un ritmo más rápido del que —aunque su emoción había aumentado— él creía todavía en poder de cualquier acto suyo. Había pasado la noche anterior con todos sus antiguos amigos; sin embargo, aún se habría descrito como totalmente en tinieblas respecto de cualquier previsión de la común influencia en su situación. Era extraño, sin embargo, que, ante el hecho inesperado de la presencia femenina, juzgase a Mme. de Vionnet parte de la situación en mayor medida que la esperada. Estaba sola, dedujo, con Sarah, y en esto había algo que —más allá del poder del hombre— se relacionaba con el destino personal de éste. Sin embargo, la mujer no decía sino algo totalmente independiente y encantador: lo que había ido, como buena amiga de Chad, con intención de decir.

—¿No hay nada entonces? Me alegraría tanto.

Saltaba a la vista, cuando estuvo ante las dos mujeres, que, la habían aceptado. Lo comprendió, mientras Sarah se levantaba para saludarle, gracias a cierta clara agitación en la cara de Sarah. Vio, además, que no estaban, como al principio había creído, las dos mujeres solas; no se sorprendió en cuanto a la identidad de las anchas y elevadas espaldas que se le daban desde el marco de la ventana más alejada de la puerta. Waymarsh, a quien no había visto aún durante aquel día, de quien sólo sabía que había salido del hotel antes que él y que había asistido, la noche anterior, por amable invitación de la señora Pocock transmitida por Chad, a la fiesta, informal aunque cordial, rápidamente organizada por la dama aludida, Waymarsh se le había anticipado al igual que Mme. de Vionnet y, con las manos en los bolsillos y la actitud indiferente ante la entrada de Strether, miraba al exterior, con notable desapego, a la Rue de Rivoli. Notó el último en el ambiente —era tremendo cómo marcaba Waymarsh las cosas— que se había mantenido totalmente al margen de la ya consignada pregunta de Mme. de Vionnet a la anfitriona común. Estaba claro que tenía tacto además de una inflexible concepción general de todo; por este motivo había dejado que la señora Pocock prosiguiera la liza[14]. Se iba a quedar más tiempo que la visitante; sin lugar a dudas, esperaba; ¿a qué había estado condenado durante meses en el pasado, sino a esperar? Por lo tanto, ella tenía que advertir que la otra mujer lo tenía allí a modo de reserva. Qué apoyo fuera a encontrar en esto estaba aún por verse, pues, aunque Sarah era inteligente a rabiar, había renunciado, por el momento, al ambiguo formalismo pacato. La mujer había tenido que hacer cuentas más rápidamente de lo que esperaba; pero más que nada le interesaba dar a entender que no la iban a coger desprevenida. Strether llegaba, precisamente, en el momento en que iba a ponerlo de manifiesto.

—Oh, es usted demasiado amable; pero no creo que me falte ayuda. Tengo a mi hermano... y a los amigos norteamericanos. Además, ya sabe usted que he estado antes en París. *Conozco* París —dijo Sally Pocock en un tono que encogió un tanto el corazón de Strether.

—Ah, pero una mujer, en este lugar tan fastidioso, donde todo cambia a cada momento, una mujer de buena voluntad —dijo Mme. de Vionnet— siempre puede ayudar a otra. Estoy segura de que usted lo «conoce», pero nosotras conocemos tal vez otras cosas. —También ella, a las claras, deseaba que no hubiera la menor confusión; pero el miedo era de distinto orden y la mujer lo mantenía más encubierto. Sonrió a Strether a modo de saludo; saludó al hombre con mayor familiaridad que la señora Pocock; le tendió la mano sin moverse de su sitio; y se le ocurrió a Strether, en el tracto de un minuto, y de la forma más curiosa, que (sí, sin duda) aquella mujer le iba a llevar a la ruina. Era toda amabilidad y gracia, pero no podía evitarlo; era exquisita y sólo con ser como era introducía, para Sarah, una repentina cuña intencional

en las equivocidades masculinas. ¿Cómo podía saber ella el daño que le estaba haciendo? Ella quería ser sencilla y humilde: en una medida compatible con el encanto efectivo; pero era esto ni más ni menos lo que parecía poner al hombre de su parte. Le parecía vestida, acicalada y preparada, hasta el infinito, para la conciliación; con la misma poesía de buen gusto en su concepción de las condiciones de su apelación primera. Estaba lista para dar consejos acerca de sastres y tiendas; se ponía por entero a disposición de la familia de Chad. Strether advirtió la tarjeta de la mujer en la mesa (su corona y su «comtesse») y no le dio tregua su imaginación respecto de ciertos ajustes privados en la cabeza de Sarah. Ésta, estaba seguro, jamás había estado antes con una «comtesse» y tal era la carta que el hombre había guardado para ella. La mujer había cruzado el océano muy especialmente para echarle a ella un buen vistazo; pero el hombre leía en los ojos de Mme. de Vionnet que esta curiosidad no había tenido tan buenos resultados que la mujer no hubiese de necesitar más que nunca al hombre. Tenía un aspecto muy parecido al que tuviera aquella mañana en Notre Dame; el hombre, a decir verdad, advirtió la sugestiva semejanza de su discreto y delicado vestido. Parecía hablar, el vestido —quizá con demasiada precipitación o con elegancia excesiva—, del sentido en que su propietaria podía ayudar a la señora Pocock en el capítulo de las tiendas. La manera en que la dama la enfocaba, además, añadía profundidad a la impresión masculina de lo que se había librado la señorita Gostrey gracias a la prudencia de ambos. Se estremecía viéndose a sí mismo, de no ser por aquella oportuna prevención, presentando a la señorita Gostrey en calidad de guía y ejemplo. Hubo, sin embargo, un breve consuelo para él en su vislumbre, mientras éste duró, de la táctica de Sarah. Ella «conocía París». Mme. de Vionnet, para el caso, había salido al paso de aquello con rapidez—. Ah, entonces tiene usted predisposición, una suerte de afinidad propia de su familia. Su hermano de usted, aunque hay que tener en cuenta su larga experiencia, lo admito, se ha convertido en uno de nosotros de forma maravillosa. —Y apeló a Strether a la manera de una mujer que fácilmente podría cambiar de tema. ¿No estaba *él* sorprendido por la forma en que el señor Newsome se había apropiado del lugar y no estaba él en situación de beneficiarse de la asombrosa pericia de su amigo?

Strether admitió, por lo menos, la valentía de la mujer por haberse presentado sin dilación para pulsar aquella nota, y no obstante se preguntaba qué otra nota, a fin de cuentas, habría, podido dar desde el momento en que había hecho acto de presencia sin más. No podía enfrentarse a la señora Pocock sino en el terreno de lo evidente, ¿y qué rasgo de la situación de Chad era más obvio que el hecho de haberse creado el joven una nueva red de circunstancias? A menos que ella se situase al margen no podía por menos de mostrarse como una de ellas, una ilustración de la situación masculina, no sólo domiciliada, sino también, la verdad sea dicha, arraigada. Y la conciencia de todo ello, en los ojos encantadores de la mujer, era tan diáfana y elegante que, mientras embarcaba al hombre en su navío de manera tan manifiesta, provocaba en éste una callada agitación que no habría de vacilar en denunciar más tarde como pusilánime.

—Ah, no sea tan maravillosa conmigo... Pues ello nos vuelve íntimos y, a fin de cuentas, *¿qué* hay entre nosotros, cuando he estado tan prevenido y no la he visto a usted más que media docena de veces? —El hombre se dio cuenta una vez más de la perversa ley que gobernaba tan implacablemente sus tristes vicisitudes privadas; sería precisamente aquella manera de salirle siempre las cosas la que haría creer a la señora Pocock y a Waymarsh que estaba embarcado en una relación en que, en realidad, no había dado ningún paso. En aquel momento todos —y no podía ser menos— le achacaban plena licencia al respecto y todo por el efecto del tono femenino empleado con él; mientras que, a decir verdad, su única licencia había sido aferrarse a la orilla con gran energía, sin haber introducido en el agua ni siquiera el dedo gordo del pie. Pero los síntomas del miedo no iban, como habría podido ocurrir, a repetirse en aquella ocasión; aparecieron en el instante concreto, pero sólo para quedar amortiguados y desaparecer para siempre. Admitir la apelación de su compañera de visita y, con los brillantes ojos de Sarah clavados en él, dar una respuesta era paso más que suficiente en dirección al navío femenino. Mientras duró la visita de la mujer se vio a sí mismo poniendo en práctica todos los menesteres necesarios, uno tras otro, para mantener a flote el aventurero esquife. Se balanceaba bajo sus pies, pero el hombre se acomodaba en su puesto. Cogía un remo y, puesto que se daba por sentado que remaba, se ponía a remar.

—Tanto más agradable, en tal caso, si nos frecuentamos —había observado Mme. de Vionnet en relación con la alusión de la señora Pocock a la experiencia de la otra mujer; a lo que inmediatamente había añadido que, a fin de cuentas, su anfitriona no pasaría apuros, con la ayuda y tranquilidad del señor Strether tan a mano—. Es él, presumo, quien ha aprendido a conocer París y a amarlo mejor que nadie en tan poco tiempo; de modo que, contando con él y su hermano, si bien se mira, ¿qué mejor guía podría usted desear? Lo extraordinario, el señor Strether se lo enseñará —dijo sonriendo—, es precisamente dejarse llevar.

—Oh, yo no me he dejado llevar muy lejos —respondió Strether, que tenía la imperiosa sensación de haber sido llamado para insinuar a la señora Pocock cómo podían hablar los parisienses—. Y temo que sólo podré enseñar que no me he dejado llevar suficientemente lejos. He tenido mucho tiempo, pero sin duda

daré la sensación de no haberme movido de un solo sitio. —Strether miraba a Sarah de un modo que creía el hombre podía tomar ella por simpático e hizo, bajo la protección de Mme. de Vionnet, para el caso, su primera observación personal—. Lo que de veras ha sucedido es que en todo momento he hecho ni más ni menos que lo que pretendía.

Cosa que, sin embargo, dio inmediata oportunidad a Mme. de Vionnet de ganar la baza del hombre.

—Ha reanudado usted la relación con su amigo; ha aprendido a conocerle otra vez. —La mujer hablaba con solicitud tan plausible que habría podido convocárseles a una causa común para prometerse ayuda mutua.

Ante lo que W aymarsh, como si se le hubiera puesto en duda, se apartó de la ventana.

—Oh, sí, condesa, ha reanudado su relación *conmigo y* supongo que ha aprendido algo de mí, aunque ignoro hasta qué punto le ha gustado. Es el propio Strether quien ha de decir si la circunstancia ha valido la pena.

—Oh, pero no era *usted* -dijo la condesa con alegría— en última instancia el objetivo, ¿verdad, Strether?, y no era en usted en quien yo pensaba. Pensaba en el señor Newsome, en quien pensamos mucho y con quien precisamente la señora Pocock ha tenido la oportunidad de reanudar el trato directo. ¡Qué placer para los dos! —añadió Mme. de Vionnet con valentía, con la mirada puesta en Sarah.

La señora Pocock la escuchaba con atención, pero Strether no tardó en comprender que la mujer no tenía ninguna intención de aceptar versión alguna de sus movimientos o sus planes que brotara de otros labios. No necesitaba mecenazgo ni ayuda, lo que no eran sino nombres diferentes para una situación equivocada. Enseñaría a su modo lo que prefería enseñar y esto lo expresaba la mujer con un árido rutilar que recordaba al hombre una hermosa mañana de invierno en Woollett.

—Nunca he buscado ninguna oportunidad para ver a mi hermano. Tenemos allá muchas cosas en que pensar, y muchas responsabilidades y afanes, y nuestra casa no es precisamente un lugar insufrible. Tenemos motivos de sobra —continuó Sarah con voz ligeramente aguda— para todo lo que hacemos —y, en pocas palabras, no estaba dispuesta a regalar ni las migas. Pero añadió como quien está acostumbrado a la amabilidad y puede permitirse las concesiones—: He venido porque... bueno, porque todos vinimos.

—¡Ah, afortunadamente! —exclamó Mme. de Vionnet. Cinco minutos después se habían puesto en pie para despedirla, con una afabilidad que había sobrevivido a un ulterior intercambio de observaciones; sólo con la más bien exagerada aparición, de parte de Waymarsh, de una tendencia a volver, de manera meditabunda, y como con una instintiva o cauta ligereza en el paso, a la ventana abierta y privilegiada atalaya. La brillante y decorada sala —llena de damasco encarnado, bronce dorado, espejos, relojes— estaba orientada al sur y las persianas estaban echadas para proteger de la mañana estival; pero los jardines de las Tullerías y lo que había detrás, a que daba todo el lugar, eran visibles entre los huecos; de modo que la dilatada presencia de París entraba con la frescura, con la escasa luz, con un sentido de invitación, se advertía en el parpadeo dorado de la parte superior de las vallas, en el crujido de la grava, el golpeteo de los cascos y el restallar de látigos que sugerían un desfile circense.

—No me parece imposible —dijo la señora Pocock— que yo haya de tener la oportunidad de ir donde está mi hermano. —Hablaba para Strether, pero el rostro lo tenía vuelto, con acentuada perspicacia, a Mme. de Vionnet, y hubo un momento en que, mientras le daba la cara, nuestro amigo esperó oírle añadir: «Muchas gracias por invitarme». Durante cinco segundos le pareció que estas palabras estaban a punto de brotar; las oyó con la misma claridad que si se hubiesen dicho; pero entonces se dio cuenta de que no había sido así: se dio cuenta gracias a la deliciosa y rápida mirada de Mme. de Vionnet, que le informó que también ella las había sentido en el aire, pero que la observación, por fortuna, no se había hecho de ninguna manera reconocible. Lo que dejó a la mujer en libertad de responder sólo a lo que se había dicho.

—Que el Boulevard Malesherbes pueda convertirse en nuestro campo de operaciones me concede las mejores perspectivas que concibo para tener el placer de volver a verla.

—Oh, volveremos a vernos, ya que ha sido usted tan amable —y la señora Pocock miró a su interlocutora a los ojos. El rubor de las mejillas de Sarah se había reducido ya a una breve pinta carmesí que no carecía de arrojo. Mantuvo la cabeza levantada durante un buen rato y se le ocurrió a Strether que, de las dos, en aquel momento, era ella la que mejor encajaba en la idea de condesa. Comprendió claramente, sin embargo, que devolvería la cortesía a su visitante; no volvería a informar a Woollett sin la historia en ciernes que tenía al alcance de la mano.

—Me sentiría muy honrada si me concediera usted la oportunidad de presentarle a mi hija —añadió Mme. de Vionnet—; y la habría traído conmigo de no haber querido primero pedirle permiso. Tenía la esperanza de ver a la señorita Pocock, cuya estancia aquí conozco por el señor Newsome, y a quien me gustaría mucho conociera mi hija. Si tengo el placer de verla y usted lo permite, me atrevería a pedirle que fuera amable con Jeanne. El señor Strether puede decirle —añadió con graciosa desenvoltura— que mi pobre niña es buena, discreta y más bien persona solitaria. Los dos se han hecho amigos, él y ella, para

alegría de todos y creo que él no piensa demasiado mal de ella. Por lo que a Jeanne respecta, él ha tenido tan buen éxito con ella como el que sé ha tenido aquí, doquiera que se haya dirigido. —Parecía pedir permiso al hombre para decir aquellas cosas, o, más bien, parecía darlo, con dulzura y gran alegría, con la desenvoltura de la intimidad, por supuesto; y él sabía de manera cabal que responderle a medias solamente valdría tanto como abandonarla. Sí, él estaba *con* ella y, enfrentado incluso en aquel secreto, de aquella manera a medias segura, con quienes no compartían su solidaridad, intuía, de forma extraña y confusa, aunque con inspirada excitación, en qué medida y hasta qué punto. Era como si hubiera estado en suspenso en espera de que ella hiciera algo que le permitiera profundizar en la situación, de modo que pudiera demostrarle el hombre cómo la enfocaría. Y lo que, en efecto, se dio mientras la mujer prolongaba un tanto su despedida sirvió con suficiencia a este fin—. Como su buen éxito es algo que él no sacaría nunca a relucir por sí solo, yo opto por ser, compréndame, menos escrupulosa; lo que, por cierto, me parece conveniente decir —añadió, dirigiéndose ahora a él—, si tenemos en cuenta los escasos beneficios directos que ha obtenido de sus triunfos *conmigo*. ¿Cuándo se le puede ver a usted? Me quedo esperando en casa y languidezco. Me habrá devuelto usted el servicio, señora Pocock —concluyó—, si me facilitara otra de mis rarísimas ocasiones de ver a este caballero.

—Lamentaría mucho privar a usted de algo que al parecer, por lo que usted dice, se merece de modo natural. El señor Strether y yo somos muy viejos amigos —concedió Sarah—, pero el privilegio de gozar de su compañía es algo que no disputo a nadie.

—Y sin embargo, querida Sarah —terció el hombre con total libertad—, me parece, cuando te oigo decir esas cosas, que no rindes justicia a la importante verdad de lo mucho que, como tú a mí, te merezco yo de modo natural. Preferiría verte —dijo riendo— pelear por mí.

Ella, la señora Pocock, respondió al hombre suspendiendo el habla, en cierto modo jadeando, según fantaseó él inmediatamente, a la vista de una libertad para la que la mujer no estaba preparada del todo. Había estallado aquello —a pesar de todo el daño que él atribuía al hecho— porque, confusamente, el hombre ya no quería tener más miedo de ella que el que quería sentir respecto de Mme. de Vionnet. Nunca, naturalmente, la había llamado de otra forma que Sarah y aunque quizá nunca se había referido a ella de manera tan notable con aquel «querida», esto era, en parte, porque hasta el momento ninguna ocasión había tendido trampa tan oportuna. Pero algo le advertía que era ya demasiado tarde, a no ser, naturalmente, que fuera demasiado pronto, y que él, en cualquier caso, no habría complacido más a la señora Pocock por ello.

—Bueno, señor Strether... —murmuró ella con vaguedad, y sin embargo con crispación, mientras las pintas carmesíes se encendían un poco más y el hombre se daba cuenta de que, por el momento, aquel iba a ser el tope de la respuesta femenina. Mme. de Vionnet, sin embargo, había corrido ya en su ayuda, y Waymarsh, como si quisiera reanudar su intervención, volvió a unirse a ellos. Cierto que la ayuda prestada por Mme. de Vionnet era cuestionable; era un síntoma de que, a pesar de todo lo que uno pudiera confesarse con ella, a pesar de lo que ella pudiera quejarse de no gozar, todavía podía la mujer, de manera insidiosa, poner de manifiesto cuánto material de conversación se había acumulado entre ellos.

—La verdad, bien lo sabe usted, es que usted sacrifica a una sin compasión a la querida María. No la deja ella sitio alguno para los demás. ¿Conoce usted —preguntó a la señora Pocock— a nuestra querida María? Lo peor que tiene María Gostrey es que es una mujer maravillosa.

—Oh, sí —respondió Strether por ella—, la señora Pocock conoce de oídas a la señorita Gostrey. Tu madre, Sarah, ha tenido que hablarte de ella; tu madre lo sabe todo —prosiguió con energía—. Y admito de buena gana —añadió con alegre conciencia de su valor— que es tan maravillosa como gustes.

—¡Ah, no soy yo quien «gusta», querido señor Strether, de nada relacionado con el asunto! —protestó en el acto Sarah Pocock—; y no estoy muy segura de saber, ni por mi madre ni por nadie, de quién estás hablando.

—Bueno, pues no la dejará a usted verla —intervino Mme. de Vionnet compasivamente—. A mí no me lo permite nunca, y eso que tenemos una amistad que viene de antiguo; me refiero a María y a mí. Este hombre se la reserva para sus mejores momentos; se la guarda toda entera para él solo; y sólo deja a los demás las migajas del banquete.

—Bueno, condesa, yo he recogido unas cuantas migajas —observó intencionadamente Waymarsh y la abarcó con una prolongada mirada que la llevó a intervenir antes de que el hombre prosiguiera.

— *Comment donc?* ¿La comparte con *usted?* -exclamó ella con divertido asombro—. Tenga cuidado, no vaya a encontrarse, antes de avanzar mucho, con más cosas de *ces dames* de las que puede usted administrar.

Pero el hombre se limitó a proseguir con sus impresionantes modales.

—Señora Pocock, yo puedo decirle de la dama en cuestión cuanto usted estime oportuno saber. La he visto en bastantes ocasiones y prácticamente estaba yo delante cuando fueron presentados. La he seguido

viendo desde entonces, pero no sé que haya verdadero peligro en ella.

—¿«Peligro»? —repitió Mme. de Vionnet con celeridadCaramba, si es la más entrañable e inteligente de las criaturas.

—Bueno, usted está casi a su altura, condesa —replicó Waymarsh con humor—; aunque no hay duda de que se le ha dado alcance en ciertas cosas. Tiene bastante experiencia europea. Y, por encima de todo, no hay duda de que ama a Strether.

—Ah, pero eso nos pasa a todos... todos amamos a Strether; ¡eso no es ningún mérito! —exclamó riendo la compañera de visita, imponiendo su idea con una feliz oportunidad ante la que nuestro amigo no pudo por menos de saberse sorprendido, aunque confiaba también, mientras cruzaba la mirada con la exquisitamente expresiva de la mujer, en una iluminación ulterior. El principal efecto del tono femenino, sin embargo —y fue ésta una verdad que los ojos del hombre devolvieron a la mujer con melancólico juego de ironías—, no pudo por menos de hacerle comprender que, para decir aquellas cosas a un hombre en público, una mujer tenía que pensar en él, prácticamente, como si tuviese noventa años. Se había puesto incómoda y consecuentemente colorado, bien lo sabía, ante la mención de María Gostrey; la presencia de Sarah Pocock —la particular cualidad de la misma— lo había hecho inevitable; y entonces se había puesto aún más colorado a medida que detestaba haberse puesto de una forma especial. Notaba, la verdad sea dicha, que se estaba poniendo en evidencia y, de manera incómoda y casi con dolor, volvió su rubor a Waymarsh, que, extrañamente, parecía mirarle en aquel momento con cierto anhelo explicativo. Algo muy profundo —algo basado en su muy vieja amistad— ocurría, con toda complejidad, entre ellos; y vino a captar la indirecta de una lealtad que se alzaba por encima de todas las extrañas vicisitudes del momento. El humor llano y desnudo de Waymarsh —como pedía ser tomado— se oscureció para justificarse a sí mismo. «Bueno, si habláis de la señorita Barrace, también yo he tenido *mi* oportunidad», parecía afirmar tercamente; y admitía que iba a descubrir al amigo, pero se esforzaba por decir que lo haría sólo para salvarle. El sombrío resplandor le estuvo mirando hasta que terminó lo comenzado: «para salvarte, mi pobre amigo, para salvarte; para salvarte a pesar de ti mismo». Sin embargo fue precisamente este mensaje quien vino a revelarle que estaba más perdido que nunca. Otra consecuencia de lo anterior, todavía, fue ponérsele de manifiesto que entre su camarada y el interés representado por Sarah había ya un acuerdo. Estaba ya fuera de toda duda, sí: Waymarsh había estado en secreto contacto con la señora Newsome. Todo, todo se transparentó en el preciso esfuerzo facial. Como si hubiera dicho: «Sí, te resientes de mi actividad; pero sólo porque de tu Viejo Mundo habré conseguido esto: recoger los pedazos en que te habrás descompuesto». Era, en pocas palabras, como si, al cabo de un instante, Strether no sólo hubiera recibido aquellos mensajes de él, sino que además se hubiera dado cuenta de que, mientras aquello había durado, se había despejado el ambiente. Nuestro amigo lo comprendió y lo aceptó; tenía la sensación de que no hablarían de ello de otro modo. Aquello sería todo e imprimiría en él una especie de generosidad inteligente. Era con la inexorable Sarah, pues —lo inexorable de Sarah, a pesar de todas sus gracias—, con quien Waymarsh había empezado a salvarle a las diez en punto de la mañana. Bueno... ¡si *pudiera,* pobrecillo, con su inmensa e intransigente amabilidad! Resultado de cuya abigarrada apercepción fue que Strether, por su parte, seguía manifestando no más de lo que, en puridad, tenía que manifestar. Puso de manifiesto el mínimo posible cuando dijo a la señora Pocock tras una pausa mucho más breve que nuestra mirada a la imagen en él reflejada:

—Oh, es todo lo cierto que ellos quieran. No existe la señorita Gostrey sino para mí... ni el menor asomo de columbramiento. Me la guardo para mí solo.

—Haces bien en avisarme —replicó Sarah sin mirarle, renunciando durante un momento y en virtud de aquella observación, como la dirección de su mirada reveló, a un contacto breve, apenas urgente, con Mme. de Vionnet—. Espero no echarla demasiado de menos.

Mme. de Vionnet se reanimó al instante.

—Y no se trata, aunque pudiera pensarse lo contrario, en modo alguno que esté avergonzado de ella. En realidad ella es, en cierto modo, bella con avaricia.

—¡Ah, sólo con avaricia! —dijo Strether riendo mientras se extrañaba del curioso papel que le habían adjudicado.

Seguiría siendo de aquel modo gracias a los continuos detalles de Mme. de Vionnet.

—Bueno, yo casi casi me atrevería a desear que me tuviera usted un poco más en cuenta. ¿No podríamos acordar una cita cualquier día, a cualquier hora... y mejor pronto que tarde? Estaré en casa siempre que a usted le venga bien. En mi casa... no puedo prometerle más.

Strether quedó pensativo mientras Waymarsh y la señora Pocock le acosaban con su atención.

—Fui a verla hace poco. La semana pasada, mientras Chad estaba fuera.

—Sí... y yo también estaba fuera por casualidad. Elige usted muy bien las ocasiones. Pero no espere a mi próxima ausencia, pues no habrá ninguna otra —afirmó Mme. de Vionnet— mientras esté aquí la señora Pocock.

—Ese voto no la retendrá mucho, afortunadamente —observó Sarah con reiterada suavidad—. Por lo pronto no pienso quedarme mucho tiempo en París. Tengo planes respecto de otros países. Tengo amigos tan encantadores... —y su voz pareció acariciar aquella descripción de los aludidos.

—¡Ah, en tal caso-replicó la visitante en son de triunfo—, razón de más! ¿Mañana, por ejemplo, o pasado? —continuó, ahora para Strether—. El martes me iría de perlas.

—El martes, pues, con muchísimo gusto.

—¿Y a las cinco y media... o a las seis?

Era ridículo, pero le pareció que la señora Pocock y Waymarsh estaban ansiosos por oír su respuesta. Era, a decir verdad, como si hubieran preparado, como si se hubieran reunido para proceder a una interpretación, la interpretación de «Europa», a cargo de su cómplice y él mismo. Bueno, la interpretación no podía sino proseguir.

—Mejor a las seis menos cuarto.

—Las seis menos cuarto... está bien. —Por lo menos, Mme. de Vionnet tendría que irse en aquel momento, aunque, por lo que a ella respectaba, la situación condujese la ejecución antedicha un poco más allá—. Tenía tantos deseos de ver también a la señorita Pocock. ¿No podría ser?

Sarah vaciló, pero se levantó de todos modos.

—Le devolverá conmigo la visita que usted nos ha hecho. En este momento está fuera, con mi marido y mi hermano.

—Comprendo... desde luego, el señor Newsome tiene de todo para enseñarles. Me ha hablado tanto de ella. Mi mayor deseo es dar a mi hija la oportunidad de presentársela. Siempre tengo el ojo puesto en tales ocasiones. Si no la he traído hoy a sido porque he querido asegurarme primero de que usted iba a permitírmelo. —Tras lo que la encantadora dama dio un paso más en el terreno de las peticiones—. ¿Le molestaría que fijásemos una fecha próxima, para estar seguras de que no vamos a perderla? —Strether, por su lado, esperaba, pues Sarah tenía asimismo, después de todo, que interpretar: de aquel modo hubo de recordar que ella había estado en casa —durante su primera mañana en París— mientras Chad hacía de guía con el resto. Oh, aquella mujer estaba a la altura de ella sola; si se había quedado en casa lo había hecho, en virtud de un acuerdo establecido la noche anterior, para que Waymarsh fuera y la encontrara sola. La cosa comenzaba bien para ser el primer día en París; incluso podía ser divertida. Pero la formalidad de Mme. de Vionnet era encantadora.

—Pensará usted que soy indiscreta, pero deseaba tanto que mi Jeanne conociera a una chica norteamericana de auténtica clase. Ya ve usted que estoy en sus manos.

La modalidad de sus palabras indujeron a Strether a intuir profundidades subterráneas con una fuerza desconocida hasta entonces, unas honduras administradas de una forma que casi le asustaba, con su escasa capacidad para adivinar motivos; pero como Sarah, a pesar de todo, seguía vacilando, el hombre tuvo ocasión de dar una muestra de simpatía por la suplicante.

—Permítame decir, mi querida señora, para respaldar su petición, que la señorita Mamie es de la clase más auténtica que existe: es encantadora entre las encantadoras.

Incluso Waymarsh, aunque más para incidir en el tema, creyó conveniente intervenir.

—Sí, condesa, la muchacha norteamericana es algo respecto de lo que su país debe permitirnos el privilegio de decir que podemos enseñar a ustedes. Pero su extraordinaria belleza sólo existe para los que saben hacer buen uso de la misma.

—Ah —dijo sonriendo Mme. de Vionnet—, pues es precisamente lo que quiero hacer. Estoy segura de que tiene mucho que enseñarnos.

Era asombroso, pero no menos lo fue que Strether se sorprendiese, en virtud de un reflejo inconcebible, en medio de otra réplica.

—Oh, es posible. Pero no hablemos de su exquisita hija, compréndame, como si no fuera la perfección absoluta. Mlle. de Vionnet —explicó ampulosamente a la señora Pocock— es la perfección absoluta. Mlle. de Vionnet es exquisita.

Había sido tal vez un tanto exageradillo, pero Sarah se limitó a dejar entrever un «¿Eh?»

El mismo Waymarsh, para el caso, reconoció al parecer, respecto de los hechos consumados, la necesidad de rendir mayor justicia y manifestó con ello cierta inclinación a su aliado.

—La señorita Jeanne es asombrosamente guapa... al normal estilo francés.

Aquello hizo que tanto Strether como Mme. de Vionnet rompieran a reír, aunque en el instante mismo sorprendió en la mirada de Sarah, que se había posado en el que acababa de hablar, un vago pero inconfundible «¿También tú?» Lo que provocó que Waymarsh desviase la mirada a propósito y la fijase más allá de la mujer. Mme. de Vionnet, mientras tanto, proseguía lo comenzado.

—Yo bien quisiera presentarle a mi hija como una estimulante atracción; ¡sería entonces todo tan sencillo! Es buena hasta lo insospechado, pero, claro, es diferente, y la cuestión radica ahora, en vista de

cómo parecen marchar los acontecimientos, en si no será, al fin y al cabo, *demasiado* diferente; quiero decir demasiado diferente del espléndido tipo que todo el mundo asegura produce su maravilloso país. Por otro lado, naturalmente, el señor Newsome, que lo conoce muy bien, ha hecho, como buen amigo y hombre bondadoso que es, todo lo que ha podido, para apartarnos de la fatal ignorancia, por mi pequeña y tímida criatura. Bueno —concluyó luego que la señora Pocock hubo dado a entender, con un murmullo todavía un poco inflexible, que hablaría con su joven responsabilidad al respecto—, bueno, pues nos sentaremos las dos y nos pondremos a esperarlas. —Pero su delicado ajuste postrero fue para Strether—: ¡Siga hablando de nosotras de tal manera...!

—¿Que no haya sino que esperar algo? ¡Oh, sin duda habrá algo! Tengo un gran interés —afirmaría Strether a continuación; y, a modo de prueba, un momento más tarde se había ido con ella, para acompañarla hasta su coche.

Libro noveno

I

—El problema es —dijo Strether a Mme. de Vionnet un par de días más tarde— que no puedo sorprenderles ni el menor detalle de que hayan advertido que no es el mismo Chad al que durante los tres últimos años han mirado cejijuntos desde el otro lado del océano. No manifiestan ninguno, sencillamente, y en tanto que política, es decir, lo que usted llamaría un *parti gris,* un juego astuto, es de lo más notable.

No era menos notable que nuestro amigo se hubiera presentado ante su anfitriona con aquel tema; se había levantado de la silla al cabo de diez minutos y se había puesto, a modo de remedio contra las preocupaciones, a pasear delante de la mujer como lo hiciera delante de María. Había acudido a la cita con puntualidad y había estado muy impaciente, aunque dividido, a decir verdad, entre la sensación de tener infinidad de cosas que contarle y la sensación de no tener nada. El breve intervalo había, de cara a la trama común, multiplicado sus impresiones: siendo, mientras tanto, digno de nota, además, que, francamente, de la forma más manifiesta ya, considerase la trama común a ellos. Si Mme. de Vionnet, en las narices de Sarah, había embarcado al hombre consigo, no cabía ya la menor duda, cualquiera que fuese lo que había quedado a bordo, que lo que más había advertido durante las horas de mutua compañía era el movimiento de la embarcación. Estaban juntos en ésta en aquellos momentos como no lo habían estado nunca y ya no pronunciaba él ni la menor de las palabras de alarma o de protesta que se habían marchitado en sus labios en el hotel. Tenía que decir a la mujer cosas distintas a que ella le había puesto en una situación difícil; tan rápidamente había comenzado a parecerle su situación totalmente, con emoción y riqueza de matices, inevitable. Que la perspectiva —dado el punto de vista— no se hubiera aclarado ni la mitad de lo que había calculado, fue la primera advertencia que ella hubo de recibir de él nada más llegar. Ella había replicado con condescendencia que él tenía demasiada prisa y había observado con dulzura que si ella sabía la manera de ser paciente, él, sin duda, también la sabría. Sentía el hombre la presencia de la mujer, sentía su tono y todo lo que la rodeaba como una contribución a aquel esfuerzo; y fue quizás una de las pruebas de los buenos resultados de la mujer que el hombre pareciera tranquilizarse mientras charlaban. Cuando el hombre hubo explicado por qué sus impresiones, aunque múltiples, seguían confundiéndole, fue como si hubiera estado hablando familiarmente durante horas. Le desconcertaban porque Sarah... bueno, Sarah era astuta; más astuta de lo que había tenido ocasión de demostrarse a sí misma. No decía que esto fuera en parte el efecto de la veloz brecha femenina en el seno de la madre, para que, dada la profundidad de la señora Newsome, la flecha alcanzara la diana con facilidad; sino que no podía evitar la resignada sensación de que, en tan vertiginosas confianzas, no tardaría mucho, probablemente, en sentirse movido a revelar que, por momentos, se le había antojado que trataba directamente con la señora Newsome. Sarah, sin duda, había comenzado a notarlo en el hombre, y esto, naturalmente, ponía a la mujer en trance de atormentar al hombre al máximo. ¡Desde el momento en que ella sabía que él *podía* sufrir tormento...!

—Pero ¿por qué? —su compañera estaba sorprendida por el empleo de aquella palabra.

—Porque he sido tan... Pienso en todo.

—Ah, nunca hay que hacerlo —dijo ella sonriendo—. Hay que pensar siempre lo menos que se pueda.

—Entonces —respondió él— se debe elegir sin dilación. Pero lo único que quiero decir, pues me expreso con violencia, es que ella está en situación de vigilarme. Hay algo que me tiene en vilo y ella puede ver mi agitación. Pero no es mi agitación lo que importa —añadió—. Puedo soportarla. Además, acabaré venciéndola.

La imagen, en cualquier caso, fomentó en la mujer un sentido de la apreciación que el hombre estimó sincero.

—No veo que un hombre pueda ser con una mujer más amable de lo que usted es conmigo.

Bueno, amable era lo que él quería ser; sin embargo, incluso mientras los encantadores ojos femeninos se mantenían fijos en él con aquella verdad por delante, el hombre tuvo su rasgo de honradez.

—Cuando digo que estoy en vilo —dijo riendo—, me refiero también a mi propia situación.

—Oh, claro... a su propia situación también. —Esto amortiguó la magnanimidad masculina, aunque la mujer se limitaba a mirarle con la mayor condescendencia.

—No es que —prosiguió el hombre— yo quiera hablarle de esto. Es mi pequeño problema y lo he sacado a relucir únicamente como parte de las ventajas de la señora Pocock. —No, no; aunque había una extraña tentación en aquello y su emoción era tan auténtica que echarse a temblar era un alivio, no le hablaría de la señora Newsome, no descargaría sobre ella la ansiedad que producía al hombre las calculadas omisiones referenciales de Sarah. El efecto provocado por el hecho de representar ella a su madre se había provocado, y esto era lo tremendo, la faceta siniestra del asunto, sin que hubiera mencionado para nada a la dama en cuestión. No había sacado a relucir ningún mensaje, no había aludido a problema alguno, se había limitado a responder a las preguntas masculinas con propiedad tan desesperante como circunspecta. Había inventado una forma de encarar los sondeos, como si ella hubiera sido una pariente lejana, educada, superficial, insignificante, que casi los volvía ridículos. No podía él, además, por su parte, sin que pareciera poner de relieve que últimamente había carecido de las directas e íntimas noticias a que habría tenido claro derecho; circunstancia respecto de la que la profunda política de Sarah consistía en no revelar el menor indicio. Estas cosas, de todos modos, no iba a confiárselas a Mme. de Vionnet... por más que le hicieran pasear sin descanso. Y lo que se callaba, así como lo que se callaba *ella,* pues también ella tenía su pudor, no disminuía el efecto de que estuviera allí con la mujer al cabo de diez minutos con mayor intimidad en el proyecto de la salvación femenina de lo que había tenido ocasión de estar. Acabó por ser incalculable la cantidad de las cosas que tenían clara conciencia de no decir. Al hombre le habría gustado conducirla, críticamente, al tema de la señora Pocock, pero se aferraba tanto a los elementos que consideraba propios del honor y la delicadeza que apenas se atrevía a preguntarle por sus impresiones personales. Las conocía, si bien se mira, sin necesidad de poner a la mujer en el brete: que ella se estuviese preguntando cómo, con tales cualidades, podía carecer Sarah de atractivos era uno de los comentarios principales que la mujer tenía en la punta de la lengua. Strether se habría sentido interesado en el balance femenino de las cualidades, pues indudable era que existían y que había que apreciar, algunas, según el gusto... pero él se negaba incluso el lujo de esta diversión. Mme. de Vionnet se le antojaba aquel día de una manera que era en sí misma una demostración del feliz empleo de las dotes personales. ¿Cómo podía pensar que Sarah tenía encanto una mujer que parecía haber llegado a esta conclusión por tan diferentes conductos? Por otro lado, claro está, Sarah no estaba obligada a tenerlo. Le parecía que, de algún modo, Mme. de Vionnet sí lo estaba. El gran problema, mientras tanto, era lo que Chad pensase de su hermana, cosa que, naturalmente, iría de la mano con la impresión que Chad había producido en Sarah. De esto sí podían hablar y con una libertad comprada con la discreción manifestada en otros sentidos. La dificultad, empero, estribaba en que tenían que ceñirse a las conjeturas. En los últimos días él se les había escabullido tanto como Sarah y Mme. de Vionnet observó que a él no lo había visto desde que llegara su hermana.

—¿Tanto se le antoja?

La mujer respondió con candor.

—Oh, no voy a fingir que no lo echo de menos. A veces lo veo todos los días. Tal es nuestra amistad. ¡Piense lo que quiera! —dijo sonriendo caprichosamente; un parco detalle, poco frecuente en ella, que más de una vez había movido al hombre a preguntarse qué era lo mejor que podía pensar de *ella*—. Pero está en su derecho —se apresuró a añadir— y por nada en el mundo querría decepcionarle ahora. Estaría tres meses sin verle, por lo menos. Le pedí que fuera agradable con ellos y se ha entregado a ello.

Strether se estremeció bajo el peso de su intuición; la mujer era una extraña mezcla de lucidez y misterio. Unas veces encajaba en la teoría que sobre ella más tentaba el hombre y otras parecía hacerla saltar en pedazos. En un momento hablaba como si su arte fuera la inocencia absoluta y al siguiente como si su inocencia fuera la más absoluta de las artes.

—Oh, se está entregando y seguirá haciéndolo hasta *el* final. ¿Cómo puede querer otra cosa, ahora que la tiene al alcance de la mano, que una impresión total, mucho más importante, recuérdelo, que la de usted o la mía? Pero se está empapando —dijo Strether sin dejar de pasear—; va camino, conscientemente, de la saturación. Me siento obligado a decir que es muy bondadoso.

—Ah —exclamó la mujer con serenidad—, a quién se lo dice usted. —Y en seguida, con mayor calma aún—: Es capaz de todo.

Strether hizo más que asegurarlo.

—Oh, es excelente. Cada vez —insistió— me gusta más verle con ellos —aunque la extrañeza del tono cruzado fue haciéndosele más chocante a medida que hablaban. Presentaba hasta tal punto al joven como resultado del interés femenino y producto del genio de la mujer, evidenciaba hasta tal punto la participación femenina en tan raro fenómeno que, más que nunca, podía sentirse impelido el hombre a pedirle un informe más detallado de todo aquel negocio que el que ya había recibido de ella. La ocasión le obligaba casi a hacer cualquier pesquisa respecto de cómo se las había ingeniado ella y tocante al aspecto que tales milagros ofrecían desde el punto de vista de la mujer, singularmente centrado. El momento, sin embargo, pasó, dando vía libre a más temas de historia reciente y el hombre se limitó a proseguir haciendo constar su apreciación de la feliz verdad—. Es un tremendo consuelo saber que se puede confiar en él. —Y luego, como, durante unos momentos, ella no dijera nada: como si, a fin de cuentas, pudiera haber un límite para la confianza de ella—: Me refiero a la buena acogida que les ha dispensado.

—Sí —replicó la mujer pensativamente—, ¡pero ellos no tienen ojos para darse cuenta!

Strether tenía su propio concepto.

—Bueno, tal vez no importe eso.

—¿Dice usted porque él, hagan lo que hagan, no simpatizará con ellos?

—Oh, «hagan lo que hagan». No harán mucho, sobre todo si Sarah no tiene más que ofrecer... bueno, más de lo que uno ha descubierto.

Mme. de Vionnet sopesó aquello.

—Ah, la buena mujer tiene toda la venia de ella. —Fue una afirmación a cuyo propósito, durante un momento, pudieron mirarse fijamente con suficiencia y aunque no provocó la menor protesta de Strether, el efecto fue, en cierto modo, como si él se la hubiera tomado a broma—. Puede ser persuasiva y zalamera con él; puede ser más elocuente que las palabras. Puede hacerse con él —concluyó la mujer— como ni usted ni yo podríamos.

—Sí, *puede* -dijo Strether con una sonrisa—. Pero en todo este tiempo ha estado continuamente con Jim. No hace más que pasear a Jim.

La mujer se sorprendió de manera visible.

—¿Y qué le ocurre a Jim?

—¿No se lo ha presentado? Quiero decir si no le ha hablado de él antes de esto. —Strether estaba un tanto perplejo—. ¿No le ha contado nada?

La mujer titubeó.

—No —con lo que las miradas volvieron a cruzarse—, no como lo hace usted. Usted, en cierto modo, me hace ver las cosas... o, por lo menos, sentirlas. Y yo nunca he preguntado demasiado —añadió la mujer —. Lo único que he querido últimamente es no molestarle.

—Ah, en cuanto a eso, yo también —dijo el hombre con resolución; de modo que, como si la respuesta femenina hubiera sido exhaustiva, fueron cordiales, durante unos minutos, al respecto. Aquello le hizo pensar en lo otro, con lo que dio otra vuelta, se detuvo de nuevo, esta vez, sin embargo, con cierta satisfacción—. Usted sabe que Jim es tremendo. Creo que será Jim quien lo hará.

—¿Apoderarse de él? —preguntó ella.

—No; precisamente lo contrario. Neutralizar el influjo de Sarah. —Y entonces reveló, nuestro amigo, hasta dónde había llegado—. Jim es cínico por arrobas.

—¡Oh, el pobre Jim! —dijo Mme. de Vionnet sonriendo vagamente.

—Sí, literalmente, pobre Jim. Es asombroso este hombre.

Lo que quiere, Dios le perdone, es ayudarnos.

—¿Quiere usted decir —la mujer estaba ansiosa— ayudarme?

—Bueno, a Chad y a mí en primer lugar. Pero también la introduce a usted, aunque sin comprender mucho por el momento. Sólo que, en la medida en que entiende su posición de usted, con todos los respetos, la considera muy avanzada.

—¿«Avanzada»? —quiso saber ella.

—Normalmente mala, aunque, desde luego, de una clase muy superior. Temible, deliciosa, irresistible.

—¡Ah, mi querido Jim! Me gustaría conocerle. *Debo* conocerle.

—Sí, claro. Pero ¿convendría? Usted puede, entiéndame —sugirió Strether— desilusionarle.

La mujer se lo tomó con humor y humildad.

—Lo menos que puedo hacer es intentarlo. Pero en tal caso —añadió—,¿no es mi maldad mi recomendación?

—Su maldad y los encantos con que, dada su categoría, él asocia aquella. Se da cuenta de que Chad y yo, por encima de todo, hemos querido pasarlo bien y su punto de vista es tan sencillo como tajante. Nada le convencerá, a la luz, naturalmente, de mi conducta, de que yo, más o menos como Chad, vine en busca de experiencia antes de que fuera demasiado tarde. No lo habría esperado de mí; pero los hombres de mi

edad, en Woollett, y especialmente los menos sospechosos, han dado pruebas de ser susceptibles de arranques extraños, de siniestros y tardíos apegos a lo insólito, lo ideal. Es un efecto cuya presencia delata sobradamente toda una vida en Woollett. Puedo garantizarle lo que vale desde la perspectiva de Jim. Ahora bien: su mujer y su suegra —siguió explicando Strether— no tienen la menor paciencia, como si se tratase de una cuestión de honor, con tales espectáculos, ni tardíos ni prematuros; lo que sitúa a Jim, como contra sus parientes, en la otra orilla. Además —añadió—, no creo que quiera de veras el regreso de Chad. Si Chad no vuelve...

—¿Tendrá él-Mme. de Vionnet lo comprendía todo— la mano más libre?

—Bueno, Chad es el importante.

—¿Entonces haré, *en dessous,* por que se quede donde está?

—No, ni hará por nada ni hará nada *en dessous.* Es muy honrado y no sería un traidor en el campo de batalla. Pero se divertirá con su pequeño vislumbre de nuestra doblez; olisqueará lo que supone extasiado que es París durante las veinticuatro horas del día y será, en cuanto a lo demás, para Chad... bueno, pues lo que es.

La mujer meditó un momento.

—¿Una advertencia solemne?

El hombre recibió aquello casi con júbilo.

=¡Es usted tan maravillosa como todos dicen! —Y pasó a explicar lo que quería decir—: Lo llevé a pasear durante su primera hora aquí y... ¿sabe lo que, con hermosa inocencia, puso más de relieve? Bueno, pues que algo *así,* en el fondo, como una mejora de su estado actual, como, de hecho, la auténtica redención del mismo, era lo que no creían fuera demasiado tarde para hacer con nuestro amigo. —Con lo que, como pareciera ella, mientras asimilaba aquello, en su incesante alarma, contemplar la posibilidad con valentía, el hombre terminó lo comenzado—. Pero es demasiado tarde. ¡Gracias a usted!

Lo que provocó en la mujer otra de sus indefinidas reflexiones.

—Oh, a *mí*... a fin de cuentas.

Se había detenido ante ella tan emocionado por su aportación que se habría puesto a bromear.

—Todo es relativo. Usted es mucho mejor.

—Y usted —no pudo por menos de responderle ella— es mejor que nadie. —Pero entonces se le ocurrió otra cosa—. ¿Vendrá a verme la señora Pocock?

—Oh, sí, sí lo hará. Es decir, en cuanto mi amigo Waymarsh, ahora *su* amigo, le deje un momento libre. La mujer se interesó.

—,Tan amigo suyo es?

—Diantre, ¿no lo vio usted todo en el hotel?

—Oh —la mujer se sentía divertida—, «todo» es decir mucho. No sé. Lo he olvidado. *Ella* me absorbía por entero.

—Es usted magnífica —replicó Strether—; pero «todo» no es decir mucho; no es más que un poco. Pero encantador en la medida en que existe. Ella quiere tener un hombre.

—¿Acaso no le tiene a *usted?*

—¿Le parece que me mira a mí, incluso a usted, con tales intenciones? —Strether desechó la broma—. Sin duda tiene que parecerle que todos tienen a alguien. Usted tiene a Chad... y Chad la tiene a usted.

—Comprendo —dijo la mujer, a tono con sus posibilidades—. Y usted tiene a María.

Bueno, aquello lo aceptaba.

—Sí, tengo a María. Y María me tiene a mí. Así están las cosas.

—Pero el señor Jim... ¿a quién tiene él?

—Oh, él tiene, o, como si lo tuviera, un lugar entero.

—Pero para el señor Waymarsh —recordó ella—, ¿no es la señorita Barrace antes que nadie?

El hombre negó con la cabeza.

—La señorita Barrace es una *raffinée* y no será la señora Pocock quien haga desaparecer su diversión. Aumentará, más bien, sobre todo si Sarah triunfa y accede a tenerla en cuenta.

—¡Qué bien nos conoce usted! —exclamó Mme. de Vionnet al oír aquello, con un profundo suspiro.

—No... me parece que es *a nosotros* a quienes conozco. Conozco a Sarah: quizá el único terreno donde piso en firme. Waymarsh se ocupará de *ella* mientras Chad está con Jim... y yo me sentiré, se lo aseguro, muy contento por los dos. Sarah tendrá lo que quería: pagará su tributo al ideal; y él habrá hecho más o menos lo mismo. En París es algo que se respira, ¿qué otra cosa puede hacerse? Si hay algo que, respecto de Sarah, conviene poner en claro es que no ha venido para ser mezquina. Eso, por lo menos, lo notaremos.

—Oh —se quejó la mujer—, la cantidad probablemente la «notaremos». Pero ¿qué será, en tales circunstancias, de la muchacha?

—¿De Mamie... si todos estamos surtidos? Ah, en ese punto —dijo Strether— puede usted confiar en

Chad.

—¿Quiere decir para que ella reciba un trato correcto?

—Para prestarle todas las atenciones del mundo en cuanto haya despachado a Jim. Él busca lo que Jim pueda proporcionarle, y también lo que de veras no pueda, aunque ya lo ha tenido todo, y algo más, gracias a mí. Quiere, en pocas palabras, formarse su propia opinión, y la tendrá: y férrea. Pero tan pronto como la tenga Mamie dejará de sufrir.

—¡Oh, Mamie no debe *sufrir!* -exageró con ternura Mme. de Vionnet.

Pero Strether pudo tranquilizarla.

—No tema. En cuanto haya terminado con Jim, Jim me caerá encima. Y entonces comprenderá usted.

Era como si, en un momento, la mujer comprendiera ya; sin embargo, seguía esperando.

—¿De veras es tan encantadora? —preguntó entonces.

El hombre se había levantado al pronunciar las últimas palabras y había cogido el sombrero y los guantes.

—No lo sé; estoy observando. Estudio el caso mientras tanto y tal vez sea capaz de decírselo.

—¿Se trata de un caso? —preguntó ella.

—Sí, me parece que sí. De todos modos, lo sabré.

—Pero ¿no la conocía usted ya?

—Sí —dijo él sonriendo—, pero, en cierto modo, no era un caso allá en Norteamérica. Se ha convertido en uno desde entonces. —Era como si él lo hubiera descubierto por sí mismo—. Se ha convertido en un caso aquí.

—¿Tan pronto?

El hombre vaciló y se echó a reír.

—No tanto como yo.

—¿Fue usted uno?

—Y muy pronto. El mismo día que llegué.

Los inteligentes ojos de la mujer pusieron de manifiesto lo que pensaba.

—Ah, pero usted conoció a María el mismo día de su llegada. ¿A quién ha conocido la señorita Pocock?

El hombre hizo una pausa, pero continuó.

—¿No ha conocido a Chad?

—Cierto... pero no es la primera vez que lo ve. Es un viejo amigo. —Ante lo que Strether dio una lenta, graciosa y significativa cabezada, que obligó a la mujer a continuar—: ¿Quiere decir usted que por lo menos para *ella* él es otra persona... que lo ve cambiado?

—Lo ve cambiado.

—¿De qué forma lo ve?

Strether atajó aquello.

—¿Quién podría decir cómo ve una jovencita inteligente a un joven inteligente?

—¿Tan inteligentes son? ¿Ella también?

—Eso me parece... más inteligentes de lo que yo creía. Pero espere un poco y, entre los dos, lo averiguaremos. Juzgará usted, en este asunto, por sí misma.

Mme. de Vionnet pareció acariciar la posibilidad durante un instante.

—¿Vendrá con ella entonces? ¿Mamie, quiero decir, con la señora Pocock?

—Naturalmente. Su curiosidad, si no otra cosa, será la causa. Pero déjelo todo en manos de Chad.

El tono de esto último le hizo mirar a la mujer con una amabilidad que ponía de manifiesto su percepción del interés femenino. Pero recurrió a su sentido de la confianza.

—Bueno, confíe en él en todo momento. —A decir verdad, no había hablado así antes de que el extraño desplazamiento de su punto de vista pareciera devolverle la nota precisa, que le hizo romper en una breve carcajada, inmediatamente reprimida. Reincidió en su asesoría—: Cuando vengan, no esconda a la señorita Jeanne. Que Mamie la vea bien.

La mujer pareció, por un momento, como si las tuviera delante.

—¿Para que Mamie la aborrezca?

El hombre volvió a cabecear con ánimo corrector.

—Mamie no haría nada por el estilo. Confíe en *ellas.*

La mujer le miró con severidad y, acto seguido, como si fuera aquello a lo que siempre debía volver:

—Es en *usted* en quien confío. Pero fui sincera —dijo— en el hotel. Quería, quiero que mi hija...

—¿Sí? —Strether esperó con deferencia mientras la mujer parecía vacilar respecto de la forma de plantearlo.

—Bueno, que haga lo que pueda por mí.

La mirada de Strether se cruzó con la de ella y así la mantuvieron durante unos momentos; pasados los

cuales, dijo algo que tal vez no hubiera esperado la mujer.

—¡Pobre criatura!

No menos inesperada para él fue acaso la repetición femenina:

—¡Pobre criatura! Pero quiere con delirio —dijo— ver a la prima de nuestro amigo.

—¿Es así como piensa en ella?

—Es como llamamos a la joven.

El hombre volvió a quedar meditabundo; entonces, con una carcajada:

—Bueno, su hija nos ayudará.

Fue entonces cuando se despidió de ella, tras haber tenido intención de hacerlo durante cinco minutos. Pero ella le acompañó un buen trecho, hasta la sala contigua y también hasta la siguiente y la de más allá. El noble y antiguo piso de la mujer contaba con tres seguidas, las dos primeras, junto a la entrada, más pequeñas que la última, pero ambas con su aire formal y descolorido, prolongaban las funciones del recibidor y enriquecían la sensación de la cercanía. A Strether le entusiasmaban, le encantaban y, al cruzarlas en aquel momento con ella, más despacio, percibió un brusco rejuvenecimiento de su primera impresión. Se detuvo y miró hacia atrás; el conjunto componía todo un paisaje, que él estimaba soberbio, melancólico y adorable, pletórico, una vez más, de pequeños retazos históricos, del apagado y lejano tronar de los cañones del gran imperio. Era, sin duda, medio proyección de su intelecto, pero éste era algo con que necesitaba contar en medio de aquel viejo suelo encerado, los pálidos tonos de rosa y verde y los candelabros pseudoclásicos. Eran detalles que podían volverle irrelevante con facilidad. La extrañeza, la originalidad, la poesía —no sabía cómo llamarlode la relación con Chad le convencieron de su faceta romántica.

—Tienen que ver esto. *Deben* verlo.

—¿Los Pocock? —La mujer miró a su alrededor con desaprobación; parecía ver defectos para él inexistentes.

—Mamie y Sarah: Mamie sobre todo.

—¿Mi triste domicilio? Pero *sus* trastos...

—¡Oh, sus trastos! Habla usted de lo que contribuirá a ayudarla...

—¿Le parece a usted entonces —interrumpió ella— que mi pobre casa podría? Oh —murmuró con remordimiento—, eso sería un acto desesperado.

—¿Sabe usted lo que me gustaría? —dijo él—. Me gustaría que la señora Newsome en persona pudiese echarle un vistazo.

La mujer se le quedó mirando, sin captar del todo la lógica del hombre.

—¿Seria eso distinto?

La voz femenina era tan seria que el hombre, mientras seguía mirando a su alrededor, se echó a reír.

—¡Tal vez!

—Pero usted le ha contado, según me dijo...

—¿Todo acerca de usted? Sí, una historia maravillosa. Pero queda todo lo indescriptible... lo que sólo se capta en el lugar de los hechos.

—¡Gracias! —dijo la mujer, sonriendo encantadora y tristemente.

—Es todo lo que me rodea en este momento —prosiguió él con toda tranquilidad—. La señora Newsome siente las cosas.

Pero la mujer parecía condenada siempre a caer en la duda.

—Nadie siente como *usted.* No... nadie.

—Tanto peor para todos, pues. Es muy fácil.

Estaban ya en el recibidor, vacío sin embargo, ya que la mujer no había llamado a nadie del servicio. Era una estancia alta y cuadrada, severa y sugestiva además, un tanto fría y resbaladiza incluso en verano, y con unos cuantos grabados antiguos, preciosos, adivinaba Strether, en las paredes. El hombre estaba en el centro, demorándose un poco, enfocando los lentes aquí y allá, mientras, reclinada en la jamba de la puerta, la mujer apoyaba la mejilla, suavemente, en la parte del hueco.

— *Usted* habría sido un buen amigo.

—¿Yo? —Aquello le sobresaltó un poco.

—Por el motivo que usted mismo ha dicho. No es usted tonto, como casi todos. —Y entonces, con brusquedad, como si su observación en cierto modo se hubiera basado en este hecho—. Vamos a casar a Jeanne.

Aquello le afectó inmediatamente como un movimiento imprevisto en una partida, pero no sin pensar, incluso entonces, que aquella no era la forma en que Jeanne debería casarse. No tardó en manifestar su interés, aunque, como en seguida advertiría, con una absurda confusión de pensamiento.

—¿Usted? ¿Usted y... Chad no? —Por supuesto, era el padre de la joven el que completaba el

«nosotros» implícito; pero aludir al padre de la joven le habría costado un gran esfuerzo. Sin embargo, un minuto después pareció que Mme. de Vionnet no estaba, a fin de cuentas, en juego, puesto que la mujer había proseguido diciendo que era ciertamente a Chad a quien se refería, y que éste había sido, en la situación citada, la bondad misma.

—Si he de contarle toda la verdad, ha sido él quien nos ha hecho tomar la decisión. Quiero decir una decisión respecto de una oportunidad que, hasta donde se me alcanza, es de lo más satisfactoria. ¡A pesar de todas las molestias que M. de Vionnet se tomará...! —Era la primera vez que ella le hablaba de su marido y no habría sabido decir cuánto aumentaba su intimidad con ella de repente. No era mucho, la verdad sea dicha: otras cosas había, en lo que decía ella, que iban más allá; pero era como si, mientras compartían juntos con tanta desenvoltura aquellas frías habitaciones del pasado, el solo detalle hubiera puesto de manifiesto la magnitud de la confianza femenina—. Pero —preguntó—, ¿no se lo ha dicho entonces nuestro amigo?

—No me ha dicho nada.

—Bueno, todo ha sido muy rápido: prácticamente ha sucedido en pocos días; y, además, no se ha perfilado todavía hasta un punto que permita anunciarlo formalmente. Sólo a usted, a usted nada más se lo he dicho; tenía muchas ganas de que lo supiera. —La sensación que tan a menudo había tenido, desde el primer momento de su desembarco, de encontrarse cada vez más «dentro», le prodigó, en aquel instante, otra punzada; pero aquella maravillosa manera de adentrarle ella seguía siendo algo exquisitamente carente de remordimientos—. M. de Vionnet aceptará lo que *debe* aceptar. Ha hecho ya media docena de propuestas, a cual más absurda; y no habría dado con ésta aunque hubiese vivido cien años. Chad la encontró —prosiguió con su cara de hacer confidencias, ligeramente, apenas sofocada— de la forma más desembarazada del mundo. O más bien fue la oportunidad quien lo encontró a él, ya que todo le sale al paso; quiero decir sin problemas. Pensará usted que hacemos las cosas de forma muy extraña, pero a mi edad —sonrió— hay que aceptar la propia situación. La familia de nuestro joven la ha visto; una de sus hermanas, una mujer encantadora (lo sabemos todo de ellos), la había visto no sé dónde conmigo. Había hablado con el hermano e hizo que se fijara; y fuimos observadas otra vez, la pobre Jeanne y yo, sin que nos diésemos cuenta. Fue a comienzos del invierno; quedó en esto durante un tiempo; sobrevivió a nuestra ausencia; se reanudó a nuestra vuelta; y afortunadamente parece que todo marcha bien. El joven quiso conocer a Chad e hizo que mediase un amigo: todo ello con un honrado interés en nosotras. El señor Newsome se aseguró bien antes de soltar prenda; se mantuvo maravillosamente sereno y se sintió muy satisfecho; sólo entonces habló. Es lo que nos ha tenido ocupados esta última temporada. Parece que es lo mejor; de veras, muy de veras, lo mejor que se podría desear. No queda más que un par de detalles que arreglar y que dependen del padre de mi hija. Pero esta vez pienso que estamos seguras.

Strether, percatado de su ligero jadeo, había estado pendiente de los labios de la mujer.

—Lo deseo de todo corazón. —Entonces se permitió decir—: ¿No hay nada que dependa de *ella?*

—Ah, naturalmente; todo depende de ella. Pero ella está más contenta que unas pascuas. Ha sido totalmente libre; y él, nuestro joven amigo, es un buen partido. Lo adoro.

Strether quiso asegurarse.

—¿Se refiere usted a su futuro yerno?

—Futuro si lo conseguimos.

—Estupendo —dijo Strether con corrección—. Se lo deseo a usted sinceramente. —No parecía que tuviera mucho más que decir, aunque el mensaje femenino le produjo el efecto más extraño. Con vaguedad y confusión, estaba preocupado por aquello; le daba la sensación de que se le había implicado en algo secreto y oscuro. Había tenido en cuenta los secretos, pero aquéllos eran mayores; y era como si, de manera opresiva —absurda a decir verdad—, él fuera responsable de lo que ellos sacaban ahora a la superficie. Era —aunque con algo de distancia y antigüedad— lo que él habría llamado el verdadero meollo. En pocas palabras, la noticia de su anfitriona, aunque no habría sabido decir por qué, le suponía una sensible conmoción y su opresión un peso del que debía, inmediatamente y como fuera, desembarazarse. Había demasiados cabos sueltos para obrar de otra suerte. Estaba preparado para sufrir —ante su propio tribunal interno— a causa de Chad; estaba preparado para sufrir incluso por Mme. de Vionnet. Pero no estaba preparado para sufrir por la joven. De modo que, habiendo dicho lo que convenía, quiso marcharse. La mujer le retuvo un instante, sin embargo, con otra pregunta.

—¿Le parezco espantosa?

—¿Espantosa? ¿Por qué? —Pero calificó aquello para su sayo, incluso mientras lo decía, de la mayor de las insinceridades.

—Nuestras negociaciones son distintas de las suyas.

—¿De las mías? —Oh, también aquello podía desecharlo—. Yo no he hecho ninguna negociación.

—En tal caso debe aceptar usted la mía; tanto más cuanto que es excelente. Se basa en una *vieille*

sagesse. Si todo marcha bien, habrá más cosas que usted oirá y sabrá y todas ellas, créame, serán a su gusto. No tema; quedará usted satisfecho. —De modo que ella podía hablarle de lo que, de su vida íntima, pues era esto lo que se discutía, él debía «aceptar»; de modo que ella podía hablar bonitamente como si, en un asunto de aquel calibre, la satisfacción del hombre tuviera importancia. Era francamente asombroso y dilataba todo el caso. En el hotel, ante Sarah y Waymarsh, le había parecido estar en el mismo barco que ella; pero ¿dónde diablos estaba en aquel momento? Esta pregunta estuvo flotando en el aire hasta que la mujer vino a ocultarla con otras—. ¿Supone usted que *él,* que la ama tanto, haría nada perverso o cruel?

El hombre se preguntó cuáles eran sus suposiciones.

—¿Se refiere usted a su joven...?

—Me refiero al suyo. Me refiero al señor Newsome. —Un segundo después se encendía para Strether una luz lejana, que fue aumentando de brillo mientras la mujer proseguía—. Gracias a Dios, tiene el más sincero y tierno interés por ella.

El brillo seguía aumentando.

—¡Oh, no me cabe la menor duda!

—Hablaba usted —dijo ella— de confiar en él. Ya ve que lo hago.

El hombre no quena sino disponer de un momento... y lo obtuvo.

—Entiendo... entiendo. —Y de veras creía comprender.

—Él no le haría daño por nada en el mundo, ni, en el caso de que ella se case, se atrevería a nada que fuera contra la felicidad de la muchacha. Y, a propósito, por lo menos, jamás me haría daño *a mí.*

El rostro femenino, más lo que el hombre había deducido ya, le informaron más que sus palabras; si se había aposentado algo en él o si era simplemente que él leía con mayor claridad, el caso era que toda la historia de la mujer —lo que, por lo menos, tomaba él por tal— estaba allí ante sí. Con la iniciativa que ahora atribuía ella a Chad, todo adquiría un sentido y este sentido, una luz, una pista, era lo que bruscamente había surgido ante él. Quiso, una vez más, acabar con aquellas cosas; cosa que se le puso en bandeja, pues un criado, al oír voces en el recibidor, había salido para atender al hombre. Todo lo que Strether había descubierto quedó, mientras el otro le abría la puerta y esperaba con talante impersonal, resumido en sus últimas palabras.

—No creo, entiéndame, que Chad me diga nada.

—No... quizá no todavía.

—Y yo, por lo pronto, no hablaré con él.

—Ah, eso según le parezca a usted. Usted debe decidir. La mujer había acabado por tenderle la mano, que el hombre sostuvo un momento.

—¡Cuánto tengo que decidir!

—Todo —dijo Mme. de Vionnet: observación que fue, a decir verdad, más la refinada, simulada y contenida pasión del rostro femenino, lo máximo que pudo llevarse el hombre.

II

Por lo que tocaba al trato directo, Sarah le había dado de lado, durante la semana que estaba a punto de terminar, con la educada contundencia de un repulgo que, al tiempo que le permitía hacerse una idea mejor de los recursos sociales de la mujer, le devolvía a la consideración general de que una mujer siempre puede ser sorprendente. A decir verdad, le ayudaba un tanto a consolarle la seguridad de que, durante el mismo período, también había dejado en suspenso la curiosidad de Chad; aunque, por otro lado, para su, tranquilidad personal, Chad podía, por lo menos, salvar los movimientos necesarios —y los suponía numerosos— para saber que ella lo estaba pasando bien. No había un solo movimiento en que, delante de ella, pudiera el pobre Strether aventurarse tanto y lo único que podía hacer mientras se encontraba al margen era dar un paseo para ir a hablar con María. Daba paseos, desde luego, mucho menos de lo normal, pero encontraba una compensación especial en determinada media hora, durante la que, al final de una jornada farragosa, vacía y costosa, sus compañeros le veían tan dispuesto que concedían una tregua a sus modales. Había estado con ellos por la mañana y había vuelto a visitar a los Pocock por la tarde; pero el grupo, descubrió entonces, se había dispersado dé una manera que a la señorita Gostrey le habría divertido saber. Lamentaba otra vez, lamentaba con complacencia que ella estuviese tan al margen: ella, precisamente, que le había abocado a aquello; pero, por fortuna, la mujer siempre estaba ávida de noticias. La llama pura del desinterés ardía allí, en su cueva del tesoro, como una lámpara en una bóveda bizantina. Era por entonces, como ocurrió, cuando, para un instinto tan delicado como el suyo, una perspectiva menos distante habría comenzado a rendir frutos. Al cabo de tres días, precisamente, la situación sobre la que él iba a informar vino a manifestar síntomas de equilibrio; su observación en el hotel confirmaba su juicio a

propósito de las apariencias. ¡Si el equilibrio pudiera mantenerse! Sarah estaba fuera con Waymarsh, Mamie estaba fuera con Chad y Jim estaba fuera solo. Más tarde se citó con Jim; iba a llevarlo aquella noche a las revistas de variedades, cuyo término preciso se cuidó Strether de pronunciar a la manera de Jim.

La señorita Gostrey asintió.

—¿Qué hacen entonces los demás esta noche?

—Bueno, ya está arreglado. Waymarsh irá con Sarah a cenar en Bignon's.

—¿Y que harán después? —preguntó ella—. No pueden volver directamente a casa.

—No, no pueden volver directamente a casa; Sarah, por lo menos, no puede. Es su secreto, pero creo que lo he descubierto. —Y luego, como ella esperase—: El circo.

Aquello prolongó la mirada femenina, pero no tardó la mujer en romper a reír casi hasta la exageración.

—¡No hay otro igual!

—¿Igual que yo? —el hombre sólo quería comprender.

—Igual que su grupo, el de todos ustedes juntos: Woollett, Milrose y sus productos. Nosotros somos un desastre... ¡pero sabemos interpretar nuestro papel! El señor Newsome —prosiguió—, mientras, ¿lleva a la señorita Pocock a...?

—Exactamente: al Français, para ver el lugar donde usted nos llevó a Waymarsh y a mí; una obligación familiar.

—Ah, entonces el señor Chad le gustará tanto como a mí. —Pero la mujer comprendía más cosas—. ¿Pasan las noches, sus jóvenes, así, solos?

—Bueno... son jóvenes, pero son viejos amigos. —Entiendo, entiendo. ¿Y cenan, por casualidad, en Brebant's?

—Oh, el lugar donde cenan es también su secreto. Pero me da en la nariz que será, con mucha tranquilidad, en casa de Chad.

—¿Ella irá allí sola?

Se miraron durante un momento.

—La conoce desde que era una niña. Además —dijo Strether, con gran hincapié—, Mamie es muy notable. Es espléndida.

La mujer vaciló.

—¿Quiere decir que ella espera salirse con la suya?

—¿Conquistarle y atraparle? No, creo que no.

—¿No quiere al joven lo bastante? ¿O es que ella no cree en su poder? —Tras lo que, como él no dijera nada, prosiguió—: ¿Sabe ella que él no le interesa?

—No, me parece que ella cree que sí. A eso me refería al elogiarla. Es espléndida sólo si se interesa por él. Pero ya veremos —concluyó el hombre— por dónde sale.

—Ya me da a entender usted de sobra —dijo María Gostrey riendo— por dónde entra. Pero ¿se atreve su amigo de la infancia —preguntó— a coquetear con ella de manera imprudente?

—No, eso no. Chad también es espléndido. ¡Los dos lo son! —afirmó con extraña entonación repentina, entre melancólica y envidiosa—. Por lo menos son felices.

—¿Felices? —cosa que pareció, con todo lo que entrañaba, sorprender a la mujer.

—Bueno... con ellos parece que soy el único que no lo es.

—¿Con su constante tributo al ideal? —objetó ella.

El hombre se rió de aquel tributo al ideal, pero explicó, al cabo de un momento, su impresión.

—Quiero decir que viven. Que corren y se precipitan. Yo ya tuve mi precipitación. Ahora espero.

—Pero, ¿no espera usted —preguntó ella, a modo de homenaje— conmigo?

La miró lleno de bondad.

—Sí... ¡sino fuera por eso!

—Y usted me ayuda a esperar —dijo ella—. Sin embargo —añadió—, tengo algo que le ayudará a esperar y que tendrá usted en seguida. Sólo que hay otra cosa que quiero me dé usted primero. Me gusta Sarah.

—A mí también. ¡Si no fuera —repitió, suspirando con diversión— por *eso...!*

—Bueno, debe usted a las mujeres más que ningún otro hombre. Parece que le estimulamos. Pero Sarah, tal como yo la veo, tiene que ser extraordinaria.

— *Es* —afirmó Strether con energía— extraordinaria. Ocurra lo que ocurriere, con todos estos días inolvidables, ella no habrá vivido en vano.

La señorita Gostrey hizo una pausa.

—¿Quiere decir que se ha enamorado?

—Quiero decir que se pregunta si lo está: pero esto basta para sus fines.

—La verdad, ha bastado —dijo riendo María— para los fines de las mujeres otras veces.

—Sí... para ceder. Pero dudo que la idea, en tanto que idea, haya servido hasta ahora también para ofrecerse. Ese es su tributo al ideal: cada cual tiene su manera. Es su romance, y, en conjunto, me parece mejor que el mío. Tenerlo en París, además —se explicó—, en este paisaje clásico, en esta atmósfera cargada y contagiosa, con una efusión tan repentina: bueno, es más de lo que esperaba. En resumen, ha tenido que admitir la ruptura de una auténtica afinidad... y con todo para intensificar el drama.

La señorita Gostrey comprendió.

—¿Jim, por ejemplo?

—Jim. Jim lo intensifica sobremanera. Jim fue hecho para intensificar. Y también la señora Waymarsh. Es el retoque final, le da el color. Él está realmente separado.

—Y ella, por desgracia, no lo está: lo que también aporta color. —La señorita Gostrey estaba en su mejor momento. Pero, en cierto modo...-¿Está *él* enamorado?

Strether la miró con detenimiento; luego paseó la mirada por la habitación; hasta que la depositó más cerca.

—¿Promete no decirlo nunca a nadie en la vida?

—Lo prometo. —Era encantador.

—Él cree que Sarah sí lo está. Pero no tiene miedo —se apresuró a añadir Strether.

—¿De que ella se desanime por ello?

—De desanimarse *él.* A él le gusta así, pero sabe que ella puede entregarse. La ayuda, la hace flotar, por amabilidad.

María consideró aquello bajo el prisma de la comedia.

—¿La hace flotar en champán? ¿Y la amabilidad de llevarla a cenar, a solas, a una hora en que París hierve de emociones profanas, en el... bueno, en el gran templo, según se dice, del placer?

—Para ellos, es sólo *eso* -insistió Strether— y todo con absoluta inocencia. El enclave parisiense, la hora febril, el poner ante ella comida y licores de cien francos, que apenas si tocarán... todo esto es precisamente el romance del querido amigo; el estilo caro, caro en francos y céntimos, en que él abunda. Y después el circo, que es más barato, pero respecto del que encontrará los medios de hacer sumamente agradable. Este es también *su* tributo al ideal. Él lo sabe. Y la ayudará a ella en este trance. No pronunciarán palabras peores que usted y yo.

—Bueno, nosotros somos suficientemente malos, acaso, gracias a Dios —dijo ella riendo— para sorprenderles. El señor Waymarsh, en cualquier caso, es un coqueto que da pavor. —Un segundo después se olvidaba de todo aquello para abordar otro tema—. Lo que usted no sabe, al parecer, es que Jeanne de Vionnet se ha prometido. Va a casarse, ya está todo arreglado, con el joven M. de Montbron.

El hombre se ruborizó sin tapujos.

—¿Entonces... puesto que usted lo sabe... ya es público?

—¿Acaso no suelo saber cosas que *no* son públicas? Sin embargo —dijo—, se dará a conocer mañana. Pero ya veo que he confiado demasiado en su posible ignorancia. Está usted delante de mí y no le he hecho dar un salto, como esperaba.

El hombre tragó saliva ante aquella observación.

—¡Usted nunca falla! Tuve ya mi ocasión de dar un brinco. Lo di cuando oí la noticia por vez primera.

—Si lo sabía, ¿por qué no me lo dijo nada más entrar por esa puerta?

—Porque ella me lo contó como cosa que no debía revelarse.

—¿Mme. de Vionnet? —preguntó la señorita Gostrey.

—Como hecho probable, no con certeza absoluta: una buena causa en que Chad ha colaborado. Por eso estaba a la espera.

—Pues ya no necesita esperar más —replicó ella—. Me en teré ayer mismo: de manera indirecta y circunstancial, pero por una persona que lo ha sabido de la propia familia del joven; y es cosa decidida. Lo reservaba para usted.

—¿Pensaba usted que Chad no me lo habría contado?

La mujer vaciló.

—Bueno, si él no...

—No lo ha hecho, en efecto. Y sin embargo, parece haber sido prácticamente obra suya. Así están las cosas.

—¡Así están las cosas! —repitió María con candidez.

—Por eso me sobresalté. Me sobresalté —siguió explicando el hombre— porque significa, esta disposición de la hija, que ahora no hay nada más: nada más que él y la madre.

—Sin embargo... eso lo simplifica.

—Lo simplifica —convino él totalmente—. Pero así es precisamente como, según dice usted, están las

cosas. Marca una etapa en la relación de él. La clave es su respuesta a la manifestación de la señora Newsome.

—¿Revela —preguntó María— lo peor?

—Lo peor.

—¿Pero no es lo peor lo que él quiere que Sarah sepa?

—A él no le importa Sarah.

Ante aquello se arquearon las cejas de la señorita Gostrey.

—¿Quiere usted decir que la han burlado ya?

Strether paseó la mirada por la estancia; había pensado en aquello repetidas veces, hasta lo incalculable; pero el panorama parecía dilatarse cada vez más.

—El quiere que su buena amiga sepa lo mejor. Quiero decir la magnitud de su vínculo. Ella le pidió una señal y él pensó en ello. Esto es todo.

—¿Una concesión a los celos femeninos? Strether se quedó parado.

—Sí... llamémoslo así. Veámoslo con su aire de misterio, pues eso enriquecería mi problema.

—Sí, hagámoslo misterioso... ya que convengo con usted en que no queremos empobrecer ninguno de nuestros problemas. Pero procuremos también aclararlo. ¿Puede en serio, por medio de tales preocupaciones, o inmediatamente detrás, haberse interesado él por Jeanne? ¿Interesado, quiero decir, como un joven sin compromiso se habría interesado?

Bueno, Strether se había sobrepuesto.

—Creo que es posible que haya pensado que habría sido encantador si hubiera *podido* interesarse. Sería más halagüeño.

—¿Más halagüeño que estar atado a Marie?

—Sí: más que las molestias resultantes de vincularse con una persona con la que no espera, a menos que haya una catástrofe, casarse. Y tendría todo el derecho —dijo Strether—. Sin duda ninguna habría sido más halagüeño. Incluso cuando algo es ya halagüeño de por sí, siempre hay otras cosas que habrían sido más halagüeñas: o respecto de las que nos preguntamos si no lo serían. Pero la cuestión era ilusoria de todos modos. Él no *podría* interesarse de esa manera. Está atado a Marie. La relación es demasiado especial y ha ido demasiado lejos. Está en la base misma y esta reciente contribución al establecimiento doméstico de Jeanne ha sido su última y definitiva prueba ante Mme. de Vionnet de que ha dejado de dar largas al asunto. Dudo que, por otro lado —prosiguió—, Sarah le haya acometido en modo alguno.

Su compañera meditaba.

—Pero ¿no quería él, para su propia satisfacción, prepararle el terreno a ella?

—No: eso me lo dejará a mí, todo me lo dejará a mí. «En cierto modo» creo —se las arregló para decir — que todo el negocio entero recaerá sobre mí. Sí, tendré que aguantar cada milímetro y cada grano del asunto. ¡Ya me acostumbraré! —Y Strether se enfrascó en la perspectiva. Luego, fantásticamente, dio a conocer el resultado—: Hasta la última gota de sangre.

María, sin embargo, protestó de firme.

—Ah, pero usted me hará el favor de reservar alguna gota para *mí.* ¡Yo sabré cómo aprovecharla! —con lo que, sin embargo, no continuó. Había vuelto, un segundo después, a otro tema—. La señora Pocock, respecto de su hermana, ¿confía sólo en su encanto global?

—Así parece.

—¿Y no resulta dicho encanto?

Bueno, Strether podía plantearlo de otro modo.

—Pulsa la tecla doméstica, que es lo mejor que puede hacer.

—¿Lo mejor para Mme. de Vionnet?

—Lo mejor para la familia. Lo natural. Lo justo.

—¿Justo —preguntó María— cuando fracasa?

Strether hizo una pausa.

—El problema es Jim. Jim es la tecla doméstica.

Ella protestó.

—Ah, pero no, sin duda, la tecla de la señora Newsome.

El hombre había pensado en aquello.

—La tecla de la domesticidad para la que la señora Newsome lo quiere: la domesticidad de los negocios. Jim está, con las pernezuelas abiertas, en la puerta de *esa* tienda india; y Jim *es,* con sinceridad, enormemente espantoso.

María le dedicó una mirada.

—¿Y usted entra en escena, pobrecillo, para equipararse con él?

—¡Oh, a mí no me parece mala persona! —dijo Strether riendo—. Todo el mundo es lo bastante bueno

para *mí.* Pero Sarah, de todos modos, no debiera habérselo traído. No sabe valorarlo.

Su amiga se divirtió con aquel enfoque.

—¿Quiere decir que no sabe lo malo que es?

Strether negó enérgicamente con la cabeza.

—Ni por asomo.

La mujer vaciló.

—¿Tampoco entonces la señora Newsome?

Aquello le hizo repetir con sinceridad lo anterior.

—Bueno, ya que me lo pregunta... no.

María insistió.

—¿Ni por asomo tampoco?

—En modo alguno. Ella le tiene más bien en alta estima.

—Con lo que, la verdad sea dicha, tomó partido en el acto—. Claro que también es buena persona, a su manera. Depende de lo que se quiera de él.

La señorita Gostrey, sin embargo, no estaba dispuesta a que aquello dependiera de nada: ni lo permitiría ni quería nada de aquel hombre.

—Se me hace —dijo— que es un hombre insoportable; y se me hace más aún —añadió con mayores dosis de imaginación— que la señora Newsome no lo sabe.

Strether, en consecuencia, tuvo que claudicar, pero incidió en otro detalle.

—Le diré quién lo sabe bien.

—¿El señor Waymarsh? ¡Ni hablar!

—Ni hablar, cierto. No *siempre* pienso en el señor Waymarsh; a decir verdad, se me ocurre que no pienso nunca. —Entonces mencionó a la persona en cuestión, como si la cosa tuviera mucha miga—. Mamie.

—¿Su propia hermana? —Fue chocante, pero la mujer no insistió en el tema—. ¿Y en qué redundará eso?

—No lo sé. Pero, como de costumbre... ¡así están las cosas!

III

Y así siguieron, por tanto, durante dos días más; cuando Strether, en el hotel de la señora Pocock, fue conducido al salón de la dama, supuso al principio que se había cometido un error de parte del criado que le había introducido para alejarse a continuación. Los inquilinos no estaban allí, ya que la estancia parecía vacía como sólo una estancia parisina podía estarlo, en una tarde hermosa, cuando el lejano murmullo de la agitada vida colectiva se filtraba por las puertas y erraba entre los dispersos objetos como un aire estival vagabundea en un jardín solitario. Nuestro amigo miró a su alrededor y vaciló; observó, ante la prueba de una mesa llena de compras y otros enseres, que Sarah se había dejado vencer —sin soplo alguno de *él*— por el último número de la *Revue* de color salmón; advirtió además que Mamie había recibido, al parecer, de Chad, que había escrito el nombre de ella en la portada, el regalo de uno de los *Maîtres d'Autrefois* de Fromentin; y se quedó parado al ver una abultada carta con la dirección escrita por una mano que no desconocía. La carta, enviada por mediación de un banquero y entregada en ausencia de la señora Pocock, se había colocado en lugar prominente y del hecho de permanecer cerrada se desprendía una repentina y extraña fuerza que intensificaba el alcance del remitente. Pensó en la generosidad con que la señora Newsome —pues, ciertamente, había sido prolija en aquella ocasión— escribía a su hija mientras que a *él* lo tenía a pan y agua; y tuvo esto al mismo tiempo tal efecto sobre él que durante unos minutos se quedó inmóvil y con la respiración entrecortada. En su habitación, en su propio hotel, había docenas de bien clasificados sobres escritos con aquellos caracteres; y había algo en la presente continuación de su interrumpida visión de tales caracteres que realzaba la frecuente pregunta de si no se le habría dejado ya al margen, de manera definitiva e inapelable. Se trataba de una certeza que los bruscos trazos de la pluma femenina no habían tenido ocasión de confirmar todavía; pero, en el presente trance, sin saber por qué, le insinuaban una probable resolución contenida en algún dictamen de la remitente. Miraba el nombre de Sarah y la dirección, en suma, como si estuviese mirando intensamente el rostro de la madre, hasta que apartó la mirada como si el rostro se hubiera negado a descongestionarse. Pero era también, en cierto modo, como si la señora Newsome estuviera, tanto más por lo mismo, en vez de tanto menos, en aquella sala, y fuera consciente, crítica y exclusivamente consciente, de la presencia del hombre, tanto que se sentía prisionero y silenciado, constreñido a quedarse cuando menos y a recibir su castigo. Al quedarse, en consecuencia, lo recibió: y al pasear con escrúpulo y sin objeto, en espera de que Sarah llegase. Esta llegaría

si él se quedaba lo suficiente y en aquel momento tenía, con mayor intensidad que nunca, la sensación de haber caído en la desasosegadora trampa de la mujer. No podía negarse que poseía ella un feliz instinto, desde el punto de vista de Woollett, al colocarle de aquel modo a merced de la iniciativa femenina. Era muy lógico que él se esforzase por decir que no le importaba, que ella podía deshacerlo todo cuando quisiese, que podía no deshacerlo nunca si no le apetecía, y que, se esperara lo que se esperase, él no tenía ninguna confesión que hacerle: día tras día respiraba un aire que pedía a gritos purificarse y había momentos en que deseaba dolorosamente precipitar el desenlace. No le cabía la menor duda de que, con sólo que le forzara sorprendiéndole tal y como estaba en aquel momento, del encuentro surgiría algún tipo de escena aclaradora.

Siguió paseando con aire cansino, en tal estado de ánimo, hasta que se detuvo de pronto. Las dos ventanas de la sala estaban abiertas al balcón, pero fue sólo en aquel instante preciso cuando, en el cristal de uno de los paneles, que estaba plegado, captó un reflejo que identificó inmediatamente con el color del vestido de una señora. Alguien, pues, había estado durante todo aquel tiempo en el balcón, y la persona en cuestión, quienquiera que fuese, estaba situada, entre ambas ventanas, de manera que podía no haber visto al hombre: mientras que, por otro lado, los ruidos de la calle habían podido neutralizar los ecos de la entrada y ulteriores movimientos masculinos. Si se trataba de Sarah, podía, allí mismo, por consiguiente, despacharse a gusto. Podía conducirla, mediante un par de movimientos, a la solución de su tensión inútil: respecto de lo que, aunque nada sacara de ello, tendría por lo menos el consuelo de haber puesto las cartas boca arriba. Por fortuna no había nadie allí para advertir —respecto de la valentía del hombre— que, incluso ante aquel razonamiento cabal, nuestro amigo seguía estando sobre ascuas. Había esperado a la señora Pocock y la voz del oráculo; pero hubo de contenerse otra vez —cosa que hizo en el alféizar de la ventana, ni adelantándose ni retrocediendo— antes de dar pie a la revelación. Estaba en manos de Sarah, al parecer, aumentar el espectro de lo visible; él estaba a su disposición cuando la sensibilidad general decidiera ponerla en movimiento. La mujer, en efecto, como acabó por ocurrir, se puso más a la vista: sólo que no lo hizo, por fortuna, en el último segundo, bajo la forma que el hombre había supuesto. La ocupante del balcón era una persona totalmente distinta, una persona representada, tras una mirada más detenida, por una espalda encantadora y una postura un tanto arqueada, ni más ni menos que la hermosa, inteligente e inocente Mamie, Mamie sola en casa, Mamie que se distraía a su ingenua manera, Mamie, en suma, más bien desperdiciada, pero Mamie absorta, interesada e interesante. Con los brazos en la balaustrada, permitía que Strether la contemplase, considerase algunas cosas, sin volverse.

Pero lo extraño fue que cuando hubo contemplado y considerado *esto,* se limitó a retroceder hacia la sala sin sacar partido a su puesto privilegiado. Se puso a pasear otra vez, durante unos minutos, como si tuviera otras cosas en que pensar y como si los efectos de la posibilidad de Sarah se hubieran visto reemplazados. Pues, la verdad sea dicha, el hecho de encontrar a la muchacha allí sola era ya un efecto. Había algo en la situación que le afectaba hasta un extremo que no había previsto, algo que, con suavidad, pero con notable insistencia, le hablaba y que le hablaba al máximo cada vez que se detenía al filo del balcón y la veía-allí, aún ignorante de su presencia. Sus compañeros, sencillamente, se habían dispersado; Sarah estaría en cualquier parte con Waymarsh y Chad, también en cualquier parte, con Jim. Strether no acusaba en modo alguno, mentalmente, a Chad por estar él con su «buena amiga»; le concedía la prerrogativa de suponerle implicado en apariencias que, de tener que describirlas —por ejemplo, a María—, habría calificado con mayor conveniencia de más sutiles. Se le ocurrió acto seguido, en efecto, que era acaso un exceso de refinamiento el haber dejado a Mamie, con aquel tiempo, allí sola, aunque ella pudiera haber improvisado, de hecho, bajo el influjo de la Rue de Rivoli, un pequeño París provisional de encanto y fantasía. Nuestro amigo, en cualquier caso, se daba cuenta ahora —y fue como si, ante la apercepción, el inmóvil agobio de la señora Newsome se hubiera vuelto, de repente, con profundo y audible jadeo, vago y ligero— de que, día tras día, había advertido, respecto de su damisela, algo extraño y ambiguo, pero en que podía, por lo menos, encontrar un significado. Había sido, en sus momentos más intensos, dicho misterio, una obsesión; y, oh, una obsesión muy grata; y había encajado en su lugar precisamente en aquel instante, como ante la pulsión de un resorte. Había representado la posibilidad, entre ambos, de una comunicación estorbada por la casualidad y la demora: la posibilidad incluso de una relación aún por descifrar.

Estaba, por supuesto, la consabida relación, fruto de los años de Woollett; pero esto —y he aquí lo más extraño— nada tenía en común con lo que palpitaba en el aire. De niña, cuando era un «capullo», y más tarde, ya flor en auge, Mamie había desperezado sus pétalos para él, con entera libertad, en las puertas de la casa, casi siempre abiertas; lugar donde la recordaba, primero muy precoz, luego muy atrasada —pues en aquella época había dado él, en el saloncito de la señora Newsome (¡oh, las fases de la señora Newsome! ¡y las suyas!), un curso de literatura inglesa apuntalado por exámenes y tésy, por último, con grandes adelantos. Pero no le había dado la sensación de tener muchos puntos de contacto; pues no estaba en la naturaleza de las cosas de Woollett que la más fresca de las frutas se encontrase en el mismo cesto que la

más seca de las manzanas. La muchacha había dado contundencia, por encima de todo, a su sensación del paso del tiempo; se habría dicho que era ayer mismo cuando había tropezado con el aro infantil, y sin embargo, su experiencia con mujeres notables —destinadas, al parecer, a madurar con no menos notabilidad— se sentía dispuesta, la presente tarde, a incluir a la muchacha. Tenía ésta, en definitiva, más cosas que decirle que las que él hubiera imaginado podría tener la chiquilla de antaño; y la prueba de la vicisitud radicaba en que, a las claras, de manera inconfundible, la joven no había sido capaz de decirlas a nadie más. Era algo que ella no podía mencionar tampoco ni a su hermano, ni a su cuñada ni a Chad; aunque imaginaba el hombre que, de estar ella todavía en casa, tal vez la habría sacado a colación, como supremo tributo a la edad, la autoridad y la conveniencia, ante la señora Newsome. Era algo, además, en que todos ellos tenían interés; la magnitud de este interés colectivo era, a decir verdad, el motivo de la prudencia juvenil. Todo esto estuvo muy claro para Strether, en el curso de cinco minutos, y no arrojó otra conclusión que la pobre criatura no tenía ahora más que su prudencia para consolarse. Lo que, para una chica guapa que estaba en París, se le antojó inmediatamente una situación bien triste; de modo que, con esta impresión, se dirigió a ella con un paso tan hipócritamente alerta, bien lo sabía él, como si acabara de entrar en la estancia. La muchacha se volvió, con un sobresalto, al oír la voz masculina; por preocupada por él que pudiera estar, se le notaba un tanto desilusionada.

—Oh, creí que era el señor Bilham.

La observación había sido sorprendente al principio y el pensamiento íntimo de nuestro amigo, bajo su influjo, se derrumbó durante unos momentos; podemos añadir, sin embargo, que recuperó en seguida el tono interior y que muchos olorosos botones de fantasía iban a florecer en la misma situación. El pequeño Bilham —puesto que se esperaba, de manera más bien incongruente, al pequeño Bilham— parecía haberse retrasado; circunstancia de la que Strether iba a aprovecharse. Volvieron a la sala, al cabo de un momento, la pareja del balcón, y rodeado de aquella elegancia dorada y carmesí, los demás ausentes todavía, Strether pasó cuarenta minutos que consideró muy lejos, en el conjunto de la situación, de lo fútil. En efecto, puesto que el día anterior había estado de acuerdo con María a propósito de la inspiración de lo misterioso, había allí algo tocante a su tema que sin duda no lo menguaba y que se cernía sobre él como parte de un flujo repentino. No comprendería sino después, al meditar sobre ello, de cuántos elementos estaba compuesta su impresión; pero sentía, de todos modos, mientras permanecía con la encantadora joven, el insigne fomento de la confianza. Pues ella era encantadora, cuando todo se hubo dicho, y sin embargo también en cuanto al hábito y la práctica visibles de la libertad y la facundia. Era encantadora, bien lo sabía, a pesar de que si él no la hubiera encontrado así le habría encontrado algo que habría estado en peligro de describir como «divertido». Sí, era divertida, la maravillosa Mamie, y sin sospecharlo; era dulce, con un aire nupcial sin, que él supiese, un novio que lo justificase; era hermosa, elegante, desenvuelta y locuaz, agradable, afectuosa y casi desconcertantemente segura. Vestía, si se nos permite llegar a tal extremo, menos como una damisela que como una señora mayor, si es que una señora mayor podía ser vanidosa para Strether; la complejidad de su cabello echaba en falta, además, la ligereza de la juventud; y había madurez en su forma de inclinarse un tanto, como para estimular y gratificar, mientras juntaba limpiamente ante sí un par de manos sorprendentemente puras; la combinación de todo lo cual consolidaba el encanto de su «recepción», volvía a situarla, a perpetuidad, entre las ventanas y rodeada del ruido de las bandejas con helado, sugería la relación de todos los nombres, de todos los señor Cox y señor Coles, gregarios especímenes de un único tipo, que ella se alegraba de «conocer».

Pero si todo esto estaba donde ella era divertido, y si lo más divertido de todo era el contraste entre su hermoso y amable mecenazgo —un polisílabo que permitía intuir su aburrimiento en la madurez— y su más bien aflautada vocecita, vocecita, naturalmente, sin afectación todavía, de una muchacha de quince años; de modo que Strether, pese a todo, al cabo de diez minutos, intuyó en ella una tranquila dignidad que reunía los fragmentos con valor. Si tranquila dignidad, casi más que matronal, con hinchados, muy hinchados vestidos, era el efecto que ella parecía producir, se trataba de un ideal que se podía apreciar en la joven cuando se había tomado contacto con ella. Lo importante en aquel momento, para el visitante, era que aquello era precisamente lo que él había hecho; lo que volvió tan extraordinaria aquella hora breve, pero intensa. Indicio de una relación era que hubiera creído tan rápidamente que ella estaba, entre todos los demás, por así decir, de lado y de parte del primer embajador de la señora Newsome. Ella hacía por los intereses de *él,* no por los de Sarah; e indicio de esto era precisamente lo que había intuido en ella, aquellos últimos días, con la cualidad de lo inminente. Situada por fin en París, inmediatamente en presencia de la situación y del héroe de la misma —calificativo por el que Strether no podía referirse sino a Chad—, la joven había llevado a cabo, y de una manera del todo inesperada para ella misma, un cambio de base; acontecimientos hondos y silenciosos habían ocurrido en su interior y en el momento en que ella se había asegurado de aquéllos, Strether se había percatado del pequeño drama. Cuando ella supo cuál era su papel, en definitiva, Strether vino a averiguarlo; mejor aún lo había averiguado en aquel momento, aunque sin que

entre ellos mediara una sola palabra tocante al asunto de su interés. Había habido al principio, mientras permanecían allí los dos juntos, un momento en que él se había preguntado si ella querría hacer algo en relación con la principal empresa masculina. Esta puerta estaba tan extrañamente entornada que él estaba medio preparado para advertir, en cualquier coyuntura, que ella, que alguien, entraría por ella alegremente. Pero, con sentido de la amistad y de lo familiar, de tacto frágil y con tacto afortunado, permanecía fuera de manera exquisita; de modo que era, para todo el mundo, como si quisiera demostrar que podía tratar con él sin quedar reducida a... bueno, a cualquier cosa, apenas.

Se le ocurrió entonces, de manera contundente, gracias a una charla que lo tocaba todo *menos* a Chad, que Mamie, a diferencia de Sarah, a diferencia de Jim, conocía a la perfección su cambio. Se le ocurrió que se había percatado hasta el último milímetro de la transformación masculina y que quería que Strether supiese qué secreto se proponía hacer de la misma. Hablaban de la manera más normal —como si aún no hubieran tenido ocasión— de Woollett y esto tuvo prácticamente el efecto de mantener el secreto en mayor intimidad. La hora comenzó a tener para Strether, poco a poco, un sabor extraño, melancólicamente dulzón; experimentaba tal reacción favorable a Mamie y su valor social que habría podido deberse al remordimiento de cualquier antigua injusticia. Ella le ponía, como al soplo de una brisa occidental, nostálgico y nuevamente inquieto; a decir verdad, podía, habida cuenta del momento, haber fantaseado con que estaba varado con ella en una playa lejana durante una calma llena de presagios, en una pintoresca comunidad de náufragos. Especialmente insistente era, mientras tanto, la convicción de que su compañero sabía de veras, como ya hemos apuntado, adónde había llegado. Ni más ni menos que un sitio muy particular, sólo que ella jamás se lo diría; sería esto, por encima de todo, lo que tendría él que plantearse. No esperaba otra cosa, porque su interés en ella no estaría completo sin este dato. No más lo estaría la apreciación a que la joven tenía derecho: tan seguro estaba nuestro amigo que cuanto más sabía de su trayectoria más debía saber de su orgullo. Ella, por su lado, lo sabía todo; pero estaba al tanto de lo que no quería y era esto lo que le había ayudado. ¿Qué era lo que no quería? Su maduro amigo se había perdido un placer por ignorarlo todavía, del mismo modo que, sin duda, habría sentido una gran emoción con obtener apenas un vislumbre. Con amabilidad y educación mantenía al hombre en tales tinieblas y era como si lo tranquilizara y le tentase con otros medios para compensarle. Le daba cuenta la muchacha de sus impresiones sobre Mme. de Vionnet, de quien ella había «oído hablar tanto»; manifestaba sus impresiones sobre Jeanne, a quien había tenido «unas ganas locas de conocer»; y comentó, con una dulzura por la que su oyente quedó conmovido, que había estado con Sarah a primera hora de la tarde —y tras terribles retrasos causados por todo lo imaginable, sobre todo, las eternas compras de ropa, ropa que por desgracia no sería eterna— de visita en la Rue de Bellechasse.

Al sonido de estos nombres Strether casi se ruborizó al comprobar que él no habría podido pronunciarlos primero: y sin embargo tampoco habría justificado sus escrúpulos. Mamie los pronunciaba con una facilidad que a él ni le habría pasado por las mientes y sin embargo sólo podía haberle costado más de lo que él tendría siempre para gastar. Era en calidad de amigas de Chad —amigas especiales, distinguidas, deseables, envidiables— como la joven hablaba de ellas y dio a entender que, aunque había oído hablar mucho de las dos, no obstante no saber cómo ni dónde, detalle muy propio de ella, habían superado ambas todas las previsiones. Se deshacía en elogios de las dos mujeres y según era costumbre en Woollett, lo que hizo que dicha costumbre de Woollett volviera a ser adorable para Strether. Nunca había calado tanto en la verdadera entraña como cuando la floreciente compañera vino a decir que la mayor de las damas de la Rue de Bellechasse era demasiado fascinadora para expresarlo con palabras, y afirmó de la joven que era ideal y de manera absoluta: un verdadero prodigio de encanto.

—Nada —dijo de Jeanne— debería ocurrirle nunca: tan perfecta es tal como está. Un retoque más y acabaría estropeándose: por lo tanto no debe ser retocada.

—Ah, pero aquí, en París —observó Strether— a las niñas les ocurren muchas cosas. —Y a continuación, por mor de la broma y la oportunidad—: ¿Nunca te ha pasado a ti nada?

—¿Las cosas que ocurren...? Oh, pero yo no soy una niña. Soy una chica grande, apaleada y con experiencia. No me preocupa —dijo Mamie riendo— lo que ocurra.

Strether hizo una pausa mientras se preguntaba si no debería proporcionarle el placer de oírle decir que la encontraba más simpática de lo que había pensado: pausa que terminó en cuanto se dijo que lo que aquello le importase, sin duda, lo habría descubierto ya ella. En consecuencia, se arriesgó a plantear otro tema, aunque consciente, en cuanto hubo hablado, de que parecía situarla en relación con lo último que ella había dicho.

—Supongo que habrás oído que Mlle. de Vionnet va a casarse.

¡De todo, descubrió entonces, necesitaba temer!

—Sí, querido; el caballero estaba allí precisamente. M. de Montbron, a quien Mme. de Vionnet nos presentó.

—¿Y es simpático?

Mamie se infló y alzó la cabeza con orgullo.

—Todos los hombres son simpáticos cuando están enamorados.

Strether rompió a reír.

—Pero ¿M. de Montbron está enamorado, ya, de *ti?*

—Oh, eso no hace falta... es mucho mejor que lo esté de *ella;* lo cual, gracias a Dios, no perdí el tiempo descubriendo. Está totalmente chiflado y no lo habría soportado si no lo estuviera. Ella está también muy acaramelada.

Strether vaciló.

—¿Y también está enamorada?

A lo que, con una sonrisa que al hombre se le antojó maravillosa, Mamie dio una maravillosa respuesta:

—No lo sabe.

Aquello le hizo reír otra vez.

—Oh, ¿y tú sí?

La joven deseaba enfocarlo de aquella manera.

—Oh, sí, yo lo sé todo. —Y mientras se frotaba las hermosas manos y se las componía de la mejor de las maneras (tal vez alzando los codos demasiado), el efecto momentáneo que aquello causó en Strether fue que todos los demás, en todo aquel asunto, parecían idiotas.

—¿Sabes que la pobre Jeanne no sabe lo que le ocurre?

Estaban muy cerca de afirmar que la joven estaba probablemente enamorada de Chad; pero la cercanía bastaba para lo que quería Strether, que no era sino que la ratificación de la sospecha de que, enamorada o no, la otra joven apelaba a lo que de inmenso y sincero había en la muchacha que teníá él delante. Mamie se pondría gorda, muy gorda, a los treinta; pero sería siempre la persona que, en la actual hora crítica, había sido desinteresadamente tierna.

—Si la trato un poco más, y espero que sí, sabré si le gusto lo bastante (pues hoy parece que sí) para querer que se lo diga.

—¿Y se lo dirás?

—Claro. Le diré que lo único que le ocurre es que desea con exceso portarse bien. Portarse bien, para ella, naturalmente —dijo Mamie—, es complacer.

—¿A su madre, dices?

—A su madre ante todo.

Strether esperaba.

—¿Y después?

—Bueno, «después»... al señor Newsome.

Hubo algo que le pareció realmente grandioso en la serenidad de aquella alusión.

—¿Y sólo en último lugar a M. de Montbron?

—Sólo en último lugar-aseguró la joven de buen humor.

Strether recapacitó.

—¿Todos, pues, quedarán complacidos?

La joven sufrió una de sus escasas vacilaciones, pero fue sólo cuestión de un instante; y fue lo más que se acercó a ser explícita con él respecto de lo que había entre ellos.

—Creo que puedo hablar por mí misma. Yo sí quedaré complacida.

Significó tanto aquello, a decir verdad, ponía tan de manifiesto que estaba dispuesta a ayudarle, tan comprometida con él en aquella verdad, en suma, a pesar del uso que el hombre podía hacer de ella en beneficio de objetivos propios con que, paciente y confiadamente, ella nada tenía que ver... tan cabalmente daba a entender todo esto que él pareció acogerlo según su propio tenor, con la más sincera de las admiraciones. Admiración que era, por sí misma, casi acusatoria, pero que no menos serviría para demostrarle hasta qué punto comprendía él. Así que agitó la mano en señal de despedida, con un «¡Estupendo, estupendo, estupendo!» y se fue, dejándola con todo su esplendor, esperando todavía al pequeño Bilham.

Libro décimo

I

Ocupó junto a este apreciado joven, tres jornadas después de su charla con Mamie Pocock, el mismo diván hondo de que habían disfrutado la primera vez que nuestro amigo viera a Mme. de Vionnet y su hija en el piso del Boulevard Malesherbes, donde su postura se manifestó tendente otra vez al liberal intercambio de impresiones. La presente velada tenía un sello diferente; como la compañía era mucho más abundante, así, de manera inevitable, eran los temas puestos en movimiento. Era por otro lado muy digno de nota que los conversadores formaban, respecto de tales temas, un círculo interno y protector. Sabían ellos, en cualquier caso, lo que aquella noche les interesaba y Strether había empezado por mantener cerca a su compañero. Sólo unos cuantos invitados de Chad habían cenado, es decir, unos quince o veinte, muy pocos en comparación con la nutrida concurrencia que se divisaba a las once en punto; pero el número y el conjunto, la cantidad y la cualidad, la luz, la fragancia, el sonido, el flujo de hospitalidad que acogía la marea de las réplicas, habían, desde el principio, pesado sobre la conciencia de Strether y se sabía en cierto modo parte importante de la escena más festiva, si tal podía decirse, en que se había visto metido en toda su vida. Es posible que, los Cuatro de Julio y las queridas y locales Licenciaturas, hubieran visto más gente reunida, pero jamás había visto tanta en relación con el espacio disponible o, en todo caso, jamás había visto tanto revoltillo heterogéneo. Cuantiosa como era la compañía, se había invitado sin embargo mediante selección y lo que más raro parecía a Strether era que, sin proponérselo, estaba en el secreto del principio rector. No había preguntado, había apartado la cabeza, pero Chad le había hecho un par de preguntas que por sí solas allanaban el terreno. No había respondido, había replicado que afectaban a asuntos personales del joven y entonces había comprendido que la decisión de éste ya estaba tomada.

Chad había buscado consejo sólo para dar a entender que sabía lo que le convenía; y, a decir verdad, nunca lo había sabido mejor que al presentarle en aquel momento a su hermana todo el círculo de sus amistades. Todo ello se contenía en la sensibilidad y el espíritu de la nota que le afectó en el momento de llegar la dama aludida; había tomado en la misma estación una línea de conducta que le condujera sin interrupciones y que le permitiera conducir a los Pocock —aunque un tanto desconcertados, sin duda, desalentados, sin duda, y fatigados— al mismísimo final del paseo por ellos aceptado forzosamente por su condición placentera. Lo había vuelto para ellos violentamente grato y despiadadamente intenso; resultado de lo cual era, según la visión de Strether, que habían estado todo el trayecto sin caer en la cuenta de que no había paseo alguno. Más bien se trataba de un callejón sin salida, por donde era imposible pasar y en que, a menos que lo advirtieran a tiempo, se verían obligados —lo que siempre era muy molesto— a retroceder. Aquella noche, sin duda, se acercaban al final; la escena entera representaba el muro de fondo del *cul-de-sac.* Tal podía suceder cuando había una mano que los mantenía en la armonía requerida, una mano que tiraba del alambre con una habilidad ante la que el mayor de los hombres no hacía sino maravillarse. El mayor de los hombres se sentía responsable, pero también triunfante, pues lo que había ocurrido no era sino el producto de su propio argumento, seis semanas antes, relativo a que todos ellos deberían esperar a ver, honradamente, lo que sus hermanos tuvieran realmente que decir. Había convencido a Chad de que esperase, lo había convencido de que comprendiese; por consiguiente, no tenía nada que objetar por el tiempo sacrificado al negocio. Más que nunca, por tanto, ahora que había transcurrido una quincena, la situación creada para Sarah y contra la que ella no había levantado ninguna protesta era la de su adaptación a la aventura como a una fiesta de placer caracterizada quizá incluso, en cierto modo, en exceso, por el bullicio y por el «ritmo». Si su hermano hubiera estado, en algún punto, por lo menos mínimamente abierto a la crítica, habría sido sobre la base de su exagerada condimentación de las dosis y su tendencia a saturar la copa. Al enfocar la presencia de sus parientes como una ocasión para los placeres, no dejaba sino escaso margen a lo restante. Sugería, inventaba, ardía, y sin embargo, siempre con el freno suelto y lejos de la mano. Strether, en el curso de sus propias semanas, había llegado a tener la sensación de conocer París; pero lo veía remozado, con una emoción nueva, bajo la forma del conocimiento, nuevamente el *panem et circenses,* ofrecido a su compañera de misión.

Mil pensamientos mudos le susurraban en el aire de estas observaciones: no era el menos frecuente que Sarah podía muy bien no haberse dado cuenta cabal de que iba a la deriva. No estaba en situación de no esperar que Chad la tratase con amabilidad; sin embargo a nuestro amigo le daba la sensación de que la mujer se endurecía en privado un poco cada vez que perdía la ocasión de dar la *nuance* importante. La *nuance* importante era, en resumen, que, desde luego, su hermano debía tratarla con amabilidad: como si fuera a gustarle lo contrario; pero este tratarla con amabilidad no lo era todo, sin embargo: tratarla con amabilidad no implicaba darle coba; y que, en definitiva, había momentos en que sentía los ojos de su admirable y ausente madre clavados en su espalda. Strether, al observar, según su costumbre, y calificar con el pensamiento, tenía francos momentos en que se sentía apenado por ella: ocasiones en que la mujer se le antojaba una persona sentada en un vehículo sin frenos y desbocado, y que daba' de lado la cuestión de un posible salto. ¿Saltaría la mujer? ¿Podría hacerlo? ¿Sería *aquel* un lugar seguro? Estas preguntas, en aquellos momentos, le recordaron las caídas femeninas en la palidez, la tirantez de sus labios, la perspicacia

de sus ojos. Lo que llevaba a lo más importante del tema: ¿acabaría ella, a fin de cuentas, por conformarse? Strether creía que, en términos generales, la mujer saltaría; no obstante, sus variaciones sobre aquel tema eran el alimento de su inquietud. Una cosa tenía bien clara —una seguridad que, en efecto, iba a ganar fuerza de las impresiones de aquella noche—: si la mujer se recogía la falda, cerraba los ojos y saltaba del vehículo todavía en movimiento, él se enteraría en seguida. Se apearía de su precipitada carrera para caer más o menos directamente sobre él; a él le caería en suerte, de manera incuestionable, recibir todo su peso. Señales y portentos de la experiencia así reservada para él se habían multiplicado incluso en los resplandores de la fiesta de Chad. Era en parte con la nerviosa conciencia de tal perspectiva con lo que, abandonando a casi todos en las otras dos salas, abandonando a los invitados que ya conocía, así como a un tropel de brillantes extraños de ambos sexos y de notable variedad de idiomas, había deseado cinco tranquilos minutos con el pequeño Bilham, al que siempre encontraba bondadoso e incluso, un poco, inspirado, y al que tenía, además, algo concreto e importante que decir.

Hacía mucho que se había sentido —pues parecía haber pasado mucho tiempo— más bien humillado al saber que podía aprender, charlando con un personaje a quien tantos años llevaba, la lección de cierta comodidad moral; pero ya se había acostumbrado a esto, lo hubiera hecho diferente o no la mezcla del hecho con otras humillaciones, directa o indirectamente del ejemplo del pequeño Bilham, el ejemplo de contentarse con ser el oscuro y agudo pequeño Bilham que era. Le daba resultado, según entendía Strether; y nuestro amigo, en los momentos de retiro, esbozaba una triste sonrisa ante el hecho de que él, después de muchos años más, estuviera buscando todavía algo que diera resultado. Sin embargo, como hemos dicho, les sirvió en aquel brete a ambos por igual para encontrar un rincón un tanto apartado. Lo que particularmente lo volvía apartado era la circunstancia de que la música del salón era admirable, y contaba con dos o tres virtuosos del canto que era un gozo oír en privado. Su presencia daba distinción a la fiesta de Chad y el interés de calcular su efecto en Sarah era en realidad tan peliagudo que podía resultar doloroso. Indudablemente, con su sola persona, la mujer, motivo de la reunión, vestida de fulgores bermejos que a Strether se le antojaron los resplandores del rayo, estaría en aquel momento en la vanguardia del círculo auditor y con la mirada absorta. Una mirada que no se había cruzado con la suya durante la maravillosa cena; pues había convenido directamente con Chad —quizá con cierta pusilanimidad— que se sentaría en el mismo lado de la mesa. Pero no tenía sentido, habiendo llegado ya con el pequeño Bilham a un punto insospechado de intimidad, a menos que pudiera coger la sartén por el mango.

—Usted que estaba donde podía verla, ¿qué piensa ella de todo esto? Es decir, ¿en qué sentido se lo toma?

—Oh, se lo toma, me parece a mí, como una prueba de que la petición de su familia está más justificada que nunca.

—¿No está pues complacida con lo que él le enseña?

—Al contrario; está complacida con ello y con su capacidad para hacer este tipo de cosas: más de lo que se haya sentido complacida en mucho tiempo. Pero ella quiere que él se lo enseñe *allí.* Él no tiene derecho a desperdiciarlo con gentes como nosotros.

—¿Quiere que lo traslade todo? —preguntó Strether.

Todo... con una excepción importante. Todo lo que ha «adquirido»... y ya sabrá él cómo. Para ello no hay ningún problema en esto. Ella dirigiría la empresa y hará la graciosa concesión de que Woollett sería, en términos generales y en ciertos aspectos, lo mejor para ella. No es que no haya de ser, además, en ciertos aspectos, lo mejor para Woollett. La gente de allí es igual de válida.

—¿Tan válida como usted y los demás? Ah, es posible. Pero en una ocasión como ésta —dijo Strether —, tanto en un caso como en otro, lo que cuenta no es las personas. Sino lo que ha posibilitado a éstas.

—Bueno —replicó su amigo—, ésa es su opinión. Yo le dije ya lo que pensaba respecto de lo que vale la pena. La señora Pocock ha *comprendido;* y esta noche está bajo el influjo de su entendimiento. Si pudiera echarle un vistazo a su cara entendería usted lo que digo. Ha puesto en orden sus ideas... a instancias de la música cara.

Strether lo tomó por el lado moderado.

—Ah, en tal caso pronto tendré noticias suyas.

—Yo no quiero asustarle, pero supongo que es probable. Sin embargo —prosiguió el pequeño Bilham —, si puedo serle mínimamente de algún estímulo...

—¡En modo alguno mínimamente! —y Strether le tendió una mano de simpatía al decir esto—. Nadie lo es mínimamente. —Con lo que, para demostrar con cuánto desenfado podía tomar aquello, dio unos golpecitos en la rodilla del compañero—. Debo afrontar solo mi destino y lo haré... ¡oh, ya lo verá! No obstante —añadió un momento después— usted *puede* ayudarme. Una vez me dijo —continuó— que Chad debía casarse. No entendí entonces como entiendo ahora que se refería usted a que debía casarse con la señorita Pocock. ¿Sigue pensando igual? Porque si es así... —concluyó—, quiero que cambie de idea

inmediatamente. Puede usted ayudarme de esta forma.

—¿Puedo ayudarle con pensar que no debería casarse?

—Que no debería casarse, bajo ningún concepto, con Mamie.

—¿Con quién, entonces?

—Ah —replicó Strether—, eso no estoy obligado a decírselo. Pero con Mme. de Vionnet en cuanto pueda. Es una sugerencia.

—¡Oh!-exclamó el pequeño Bilham concierta brusquedad.

—¡Oh, precisamente! Pero él no tiene ninguna necesidad de casarse... En cualquier caso, no estoy yo obligado a mirar por ello. Mientras que en el caso de usted, me parece que sí.

El pequeño Bilham se sentía divertido.

—¿Se siente obligado a mirar por mi matrimonio?

—Sí... después de todo lo que he hecho por usted.

El joven sopesó aquello.

—¿Y ha llegado al extremo de hacer eso?

—Bueno —dijo Strether, ante aquel planteamiento—, desde luego, debo recordar lo que usted ha hecho, a su vez, por *mí*. Tal vez tengamos que hablar de empate. Pero, de todos modos —prosiguió—, desearía que usted se casara con Mamie Pocock.

El pequeño Bilham rompió a reír.

—Bueno, pero si usted mismo, la otra noche, en este mismo lugar, me proponía un enlace totalmente distinto.

—¿Con Mlle. de Vionnet? —Bien, Strether no tenía reparo en admitirlo—. Eso, lo reconozco, fue una vana ilusión. Lo de ahora es política práctica. Quiero hacer algo de provecho por usted y por ella... y quisiera que usted hiciera lo mismo por nosotros. No le será difícil comprender que me ahorraría muchas molestias despachándole a usted en el acto. Usted le gusta. Usted la consuela. Y ella es espléndida.

El pequeño Bilham parecía mirar con delicado apetito una fuente repleta de manjares.

—¿De qué la consuelo?

Aquello hizo que su amigo se mostrara impaciente.

—Oh, vamos, ¡lo sabe usted muy bien!

—¿Y qué pruebas tiene usted de que le gusto?

—Bueno, el hecho de encontrarla, hace tres días, sola en su casa, con una tarde magnífica, esperándole a usted, y pendiente desde el balcón de que usted llegara. No sé qué más quiere.

El pequeño Bilham, al cabo de un instante, dio con ello.

—Saber solamente qué pruebas tiene usted de que *ella* me gusta a mí.

—Oh, si lo que le he contado no es suficiente, es que es usted un desalmado inconmovible. Además —Strether acicateó el vuelo de su fantasía—, dejó entrever usted su inclinación por el hecho de hacerla esperar adrede para ver si se preocupaba lo suficiente por usted.

Su compañero recompensó su habilidad con la deferencia de una pausa.

—No la hice esperar. Llegué a la hora convenida. No la habría hecho esperar por nada en el mundo —afirmó con honradez el joven.

—Mejor me lo pone... ¡es su oportunidad! —Strether, embriagado, procuraba convencerle—. Aun cuando usted no la tratase con justicia, por otro lado —continuó—, yo insistiría en que no se andase usted con rodeos. Ardo en deseos de que esto termine. Quiero —y nuestro amigo hablaba ahora con una solicitud que era en realidad avidez— haber hecho *esto* por lo menos.

—¿Que yo me case... sin un céntimo?

—Bueno, yo no voy a vivir eternamente; y le doy mi palabra de que le dejaré a usted hasta el último céntimo de que dispongo. No tengo mucho dinero, por desgracia, pero lo tendrá usted todo. La señorita Pocock, me parece, dispone de algo. Quiero —continuó Strether— ser, por lo menos hasta ese punto, constructivo... incluso expiatorio. Me he sacrificado tanto a los dioses ajenos que me parece que quiero dar constancia, como sea, de mi lealtad, en el fondo siempre la misma, a los nuestros. Me siento como si tuviera las manos manchadas con la sangre de monstruosos altares extranjeros, de una fe distinta. Esta es la cuestión... y está decidido. —A lo que añadió a modo de explicación—: Es algo que se me ocurrió porque la idea de apartarla de Chad me ayuda a aclarar mi propia situación.

El joven, al oír aquello, se volvió con rapidez, de modo que quedaron frente por frente con hilaridad manifiesta.

—¿Quiere usted que yo me case porque conviene a Chad?

—No —rebatió Strether—; a *él* no le importa que usted se case o no. Es, sencillamente, porque conviene al plan que yo he tramado *para* él.

—¡Sencillamente! —y la coincidencia del pequeño Bilham fue en sí misma un significativo comentario

—. Gracias. Pero yo pensaba —prosiguió— que usted no tenía ningún plan «para» él.

—Bueno, en tal caso digamos que es un plan para mí mismo, lo que puede traducirse, como dice usted, por no tener ninguno. La situación de nuestro joven se reduce a los hechos escuetos que hay que identificar. Mamie no le quiere y él no quiere a Mamie: esto, por lo menos, han puesto de manifiesto los últimos días. Es un hilo que puede conducirnos al ovillo.

Pero el pequeño Bilham siguió preguntando.

—Podrá uste_ d... ya que parece desearlo tanto. Pero ¿y yo?

El bueno de Strether meditó aquello con detenimiento, pero se vio obligado, desde luego, a admitir que sus esfuerzos, al parecer, habían caído en saco roto.

—Hablando con propiedad, no hay ningún motivo. Es cosa mía y he de afrontarla solo. Es sólo mi fantástica necesidad de no transigir con la dulzura de mis dosis.

—¿Qué son sus dosis? —preguntó el pequeño Bilham.

—Bueno, lo que tengo que tragar. No quiero endulzar mi situación.

Había hablado en el tono habitual de las conversaciones, pues en una estaba, pero con una oscura verdad acechando en los recodos de lo accesorio; circunstancia que, en aquel momento, no dejó de producir su efecto en su joven amigo. Los ojos del pequeño Bilham se posaron en él con cierta intensidad; luego, de pronto, como si todo se hubiera aclarado, lanzó una alegre carcajada. Parecía dar a entender que si fingiendo, o incluso intentando, y hasta esperando tener la posibilidad de ocuparse de Mamie iba a ser útil, entonces estaba totalmente a su disposición.

—¡Haría cualquier cosa por usted!

—Bueno —dijo Strether sonriendo—, cualquier cosa es lo que me hace falta. Creo que lo que más me gustó de ella —prosiguió— fue la forma en que, tras verla allí sola, cogiéndola desprevenida y alegrándome por saberla tan al margen de todo, vino a derribar mi castillo de naipes con su espontánea y complacida alusión al joven que estaba al llegar. Fue en cierto modo el detalle que yo necesitaba: ella en casa, esperando recibirle.

—Fue Chad, desde luego —dijo el pequeño Bilham— quien pidió al joven que estaba al llegar,!me gusta el nombre que me ha puesto!, que acudiera.

—Bueno, supongo que tiene que ser así, y gracias sean dadas a Dios por todo ello, en nuestras inocentes y naturales costumbres. Pero ¿sabe usted —preguntó Strether— si Chad está al tanto...? —Y entonces, como su interlocutor pareciera no comprender—. Bueno, si sabe qué piensa ella.

El pequeño Bilham, al oír aquello, adoptó una expresión de inteligencia; era como si la alusión le hubiera calado hondo, más que ninguna otra cosa hasta el momento.

—¿Lo sabe usted?

Strether negó con la cabeza ligeramente.

—Ahí no llego. Oh, por extraño que le parezca, hay cosas que no sé. Sólo alcanzaba a intuir que había en ella algo muy intenso, muy profundo también, que se guardaba para sí. Creía que se lo guardaba para sí y partía de este supuesto; pero al estar cara a cara con ella no tardé en descubrir que existía una persona con quien ella querría compartir el secreto. Yo había pensado que tal vez se trataba de mí... pero comprendí en seguida que su confianza conmigo era sólo a medias. Ella estaba en el balcón y yo había entrado sin que ella lo advirtiera; cuando se volvió para saludarme, manifestó a las claras que le esperaba a *usted* y en consecuencia dio muestras de desilusión; fue entonces cuando pesqué el primer cabo de la verdad. Media hora más tarde estaba en posesión de lo restante. Ya sabe lo ocurrido. —Miró a su joven amigo con fijeza... y entonces se sintió seguro—. A pesar de lo que diga usted, ella está por sus huesos. De modo que la tiene usted al alcance de la mano.

El pequeño Bilham, transcurridos unos instantes, se repuso a medias.

—Le aseguro a usted que ella no me ha dicho nada.

—Naturalmente que no. ¿Acaso le estoy sugiriendo que se va a arrojar en sus brazos sin más? Pero usted ha estado con ella todos los días, la ha visto a sus anchas, le ha gustado a usted mucho, y en eso me baso: y nada ha sido en vano. Usted sabe lo que ella piensa como sabe que ha cenado aquí esta noche: cosa que, por cierto, la habrá puesto mucho más a tono.

El joven soportó la descarga; tras lo cual procuró reponerse en lo que le faltaba.

—Yo no he dicho en ningún momento que no me sea simpática. Pero es altiva.

—Y con mucha elegancia. Pero no en exceso.

—Y es su altivez la que conduce sus actos. Chad —prosiguió con lealtad el pequeño Bilham— ha sido con ella de lo más amable. Y es terrible para un hombre cuando una chica está enamorada de él.

—Ah, pero ya no lo está.

El pequeño Bilham se le quedó mirando; entonces se puso en pie, como si la observación de su amigo, reiterativa e insistente, le hubiera puesto, en definitiva, muy nervioso.

—No, no lo está ya. Pero no ha sido —continuó— por culpa de Chad. El es intachable. Quiero decir que es posible que lo deseara. Pero ella salió con sus ocurrencias. Las había concebido ya en casa. Habían sido su motivo y su sostén al unirse a su hermano y su cuñada. Quería *salvar a* nuestro amigo.

—Ah, ¿como yo, desdichado de mí? —Strether se puso en pie asimismo.

—Ni más ni menos: tuvo un mal momento. No tardó en comprender, para su tranquilidad y sosiego, que, ay, que él estaba, que él está *ya* salvado. De modo que ya no tiene nada que hacer.

—¿Ni siquiera amarle?

—Le habría amado mejor si hubiera creído en él al principio.

Strether meditaba.

—Por supuesto, uno se pregunta qué idea se forjará una jovencita, respecto de un joven, de una historia y una situación así.

—Bueno, nuestra jovencita las consideraba, sin duda, oscuras, pero también, prácticamente, falsas. Lo falso, para ella, era lo oscuro. Chad resulta al cabo que es honrado, bueno y desconcertante, mientras que ella únicamente estaba preparada, y resuelta y decidida, para tratar con un hombre a quien creía todo lo contrario.

—No obstante, ¿no era su objetivo final —tanteó Strether— que el joven tenía que ser, *podía* ser, mejorado y redimido?

El pequeño Bilham caviló un momento, y entonces, con un leve cabeceo que prodigaba cierta ternura:

—Ha llegado demasiado tarde. Demasiado tarde para el milagro.

—Sí —su compañero lo comprendía bien—. Pero ¿y si el peor defecto de la situación de nuestro joven es que puede dar lugar a que ella se aproveche de la misma?

—Oh, ella no quiere «aprovecharse» de esa forma tan grosera. Ella no quiere aprovecharse de la obra de otra mujer: ella quiere el milagro que tendría que haber sido suyo. Para eso es para lo que ha llegado demasiado tarde.

—Strether advirtió plenamente que todo encajaba; sin embargo, parecía haber una pieza suelta.

—He de decir, compréndame, que la muchacha da la sensación, en este sentido, de ser fastidiosa: lo que aquí llamarían *difficile*.

El pequeño Bilham alzó bruscamente el mentón.

—¡Claro que es *difficile*... en cualquier sentido! ¿Qué otra cosa son nuestras Mamies, las mejores, las verdaderas, las auténticas?

—Entiendo, entiendo —repitió nuestro amigo, encantado con la solícita sabiduría que había terminado por provocar—. Mamie es una de las mejores, las verdaderas y las auténticas.

—Ni más ni menos.

—De lo que se deduce, en tal caso —prosiguió Stretheres que el pobrecito de Chad es, sencillamente, demasiado bueno para ella.

—Ah, demasiado bueno era lo que, a fin de cuentas, tenía qùe ser; pero era ella, ella y nadie más, quien tenía que haberle hecho así.

Todo encajaba de maravilla, salvo un último cabo suelto.

—¿Y, por ella, en el caso de que pudiera, no rompería él...?

—¿Con lo que ahora le domina? —Oh, el pequeño Bilham tenía para aquella pregunta el más incisivo de sus regímenes—. ¿Cómo va a romper, fueran cuales fuesen los términos, si está escandalosamente destrozado?

Strether sólo pudo afrontar la última pregunta con su atenta y pasiva complacencia.

—Bueno, gracias a Dios, no lo está *usted*. Usted está a salvo para ella, y con esto vuelvo, con tan hermosa y amplia manifestación, a mi argumento de hace un segundo: usted da claras muestras de que ella ha comenzado ya.

Lo más que podía decirse a sí propio, a modo de complemento —mientras su joven amigo se alejaba— era que la acusación no había tropezado por el momento con ninguna reiterada negativa. El pequeño Bilham, mientras se encaminaba donde la música, se limitó a girar las agradables orejas un instante, a la manera de un terrier al que echan agua; mientras Strether reincidía en la sensación —que le proporcionaba en aquellos días el máximo consuelo— de que era libre de creer en cualquier cosa que, a lo largo de los mojones de las horas, le mantuviera en movimiento. Había, sin duda, deslices y conmociones de este jaez horario, ocasionales concesiones a la ironía y a la fantasía, frecuentes arrebatos instintivos de observación acumulativa, cada vez más violentos en cuanto a olores y colores y en que podía hundir la nariz hasta lo caprichoso. Este último recurso se le presentó, si a ello vamos, bajo la forma misma de su siguiente percepción, nada oscura: la imagen de un rápido y breve encuentro, en la entrada de la sala, entre el pequeño Bilham y la perspicaz señorita Barrace, que entraba mientras Bilham se alejaba. Al parecer le había hecho ella una pregunta, a la que él había replicado con un giro que vino a señalar a su reciente

interlocutor; hacia el cual, tras un interrogante añadido por un recurso al aparejo óptico que parecía, como los demás ornatos femeninos, curioso y arcaico, aquella dama genial, sugiriendo más que nunca a los ojos del hombre los antiguos grabados franceses, los retratos históricos, se dirigió con una intención que Strether adivinó. Sabía él ya cuál sería la primera tecla que la dama pulsaría y comprendió, mientras ella se acercaba, toda la necesidad femenina de pulsarla. Nada, empero, había sido tan «maravilloso» entre ellos como la ocasión presente; y era la especial intuición femenina de dicha cualidad respecto de las ocasiones que ella estaba allí, como en casi todas partes, para proveer. La intuición estaba tan bien provista por la situación tocante a ellos que había dejado la otra sala, olvidado la música, rechazado la pieza, abandonado, en una palabra, el escenario mismo, que podía estar un minuto entre bastidores con Strether y así aparecer acaso como uno de los célebres augures, respondiendo, tras el oráculo, al guiño del otro. Sentada en aquel momento a su lado, donde el pequeño Bilham había estado, respondía ella, a decir verdad, a muchas cosas; comenzando en cuanto el hombre le hubo dicho —lo que esperaba le saliera sin fatuidad—:

—Las damas son extraordinariamente amables conmigo.

La mujer movió el largo mango, que desvió su objetivo visual; comprendió la mujer en el acto todas las ausencias, todas las atenciones desviadas, que les permitían la presente libertad.

—¿Qué remedio nos queda? Aunque, ¿no es eso precisamente lo que le inquieta? «Las damas»... oh, somos encantadoras y usted tiene que tener muchas a su disposición. Entiéndame, como tal, no creo estar chiflada por nosotras. Pero la señorita Gostrey, por lo menos esta noche, le ha dejado solo, ¿no? —con lo que volvió a mirar a su alrededor como si María pudiera andar al acecho.

—Oh, sí —dijo Strether—, me espera en casa. —Y como esto despertara en su compañera su alegre «¡Oh, oh, oh!», explicó que la espera afectaba a la incertidumbre y las súplicas—. Pensamos que lo mejor era que no viniese; de una forma o de otra, desde luego, le causa una gran preocupación. —Insistió el hombre en el sentido de su apelación a las mujeres y en que éstas podían afrontar la actitud masculina con humildad o con soberbia—. Sin embargo, ella se inclina a creer que yo lo contaré todo.

—Oh, yo también me inclino a creerlo —la señorita Barrace, con su risa, no iba a ser menos—. Sólo que la cuestión es *dónde,* ¿verdad? Sin embargo —prosiguió con entusiasmo—, si es en alguna parte, tiene que ser muy lejos, ¿no cree? Para hacemos justicia, me parece, entiéndame —dijo riendo—, todas queremos que llegue usted muy lejos. Sí, sí —repitió con su rápida y graciosa manera—; queremos que llegue usted muy, *muy* lejos. —Tras lo que quiso saber por qué había creído conveniente que María no acudiera.

—Oh —replicó él—, en realidad fue idea suya. A mí me habría gustado. Pero teme las responsabilidades.

—¿Y no es eso una novedad?

—¿El temor? Sin duda... sin duda. Pero los nervios la tienen destrozada.

La señorita Barrace observó al hombre durante unos momentos.

—Tiene mucho en juego. —A continuación, con menor seriedad—: El mío, por fortuna, no es tan decisivo.

—Por fortuna también para mí —replicó Strether—. El mío no es tan seguro, mi deseo de responsabilidades no es tan acuciante que no sepa que la consigna de esta ocasión es estar «más que contento». Si estamos tan contentos es porque Chad ha comprendido.

—Ha comprendido de manera asombrosa —dijo la señorita Barrace.

—¡Es maravilloso! —se le anticipó Strether.

—¡Es maravilloso! —exageró ella, para responderle; de modo que, frente por frente ante aquello, se limitaron a reír sin consideración alguna. Pero entonces añadió la mujer—: Oh, entiendo la consigna. Si uno no la tuviera se sentiría perdido. Pero una vez que se asimila...

—Es tan sencillo como sumar dos y dos. Desde el momento en que él tenía que hacer algo...

—¿Y este gentío —le atajó ella— es lo único que se le ocurrió? Mejor todavía, un auténtico jaleo —dijo riendo— o nada. La señora Pocock está empotrada, o enganchada, como quiera llamarlo; está tan maniatada que no puede ni moverse. Se encuentra en un maravilloso aislamiento —añadió de su cosecha la señorita Barrace.

Strether comprendió, sólo escrupuloso de la justicia.

—Sin embargo, le han presentado a todos los que están aquí.

—Es asombroso, pero es precisamente eso lo que la ata. Está emparedada, enterrada en vida.

—Strether pareció pensar en ello durante un momento; pero acabó por provocarle un suspiro.

—Oh, pero no está muerta. Necesita mucho más para morirse.

Su compañera hizo una pausa, que podía deberse a la compasión.

—No, yo no digo que esté acabada... o que haya de continuar así después de esta noche. —Seguía pensativa, como con remordimientos—. Simplemente, anda de capa caída. —Entonces, para enfocar el lado gracioso—: Aún respira.

—¡Aún respira! —repitió el hombre con el mismo humor—. ¿Y sabe usted —añadió— lo que de veras me ocurre a mí esta noche... gracias a la belleza de la música, la alegría de las voces, el alboroto, en suma, de nuestra diversión y la oportunidad de su ingenio de usted? Que el ruido que la señora Pocock produce al respirar me impide, se lo aseguro a usted, oír nada más. Es, materialmente, lo único que oigo.

La mujer le miró fijamente con tintinear de cadenitas.

—Bueno... —exclamó con su eterna amabilidad.

—Bueno, ¿qué?

—Que la capa caída no le cubre la nariz —dijo bromeando la mujer—; y que eso le basta.

—¡Y a mí también! —exclamó Strether riendo—. ¿En serio la ha traído Waymarsh —preguntó entonces — para que la vea a usted?

—Sí... pero ésa es la peor parte. No pude ayudarle a usted en nada. Y eso que lo he intentado.

—¿Y cómo lo intentó? —preguntó Strether.

—Bueno, pues no hablando de usted.

—Entiendo. Eso estuvo mejor.

—¿Qué habría sido peor entonces? Tanto hablando como guardando silencio —se quejó la mujer—;'de algún modo me «comprometo». Y nunca ha habido nadie salvo usted.

—Lo que demuestra —el hombre se mostraba magnánimo— que se trata de algo que no está en usted, sino en mí. La culpa es *mía.*

La mujer guardó silencio durante un momento.

—No, es del señor Waymarsh. Culpa de haberla traído. —Ah, entonces —dijo Strether de buen humor —, ¿por qué la ha traído?

—No podía evitarlo.

—Oh, ¿que usted fuera un trofeo... uno de los despojos de la conquista? Pero, bueno, en tal caso, puesto que usted se «compromete»...,

—¿No lo comprometo a *él* también? Sí, a él también lo comprometo. —La señorita Barrace sonrió—. Lo comprometo tanto como puedo. Pero para el señor Waymarsh no es mortal. Es, por lo que afecta a su maravillosa relación con la señora Pocock, favorable. —Entonces, como el hombre pareciera estar todavía un poco en Babia—: El hombre que me conquistó, ¿no comprende? Para ella, obtenerlo de mí no fue sino un incentivo adicional.

Strether comprendía, pero como si su andadura estuviese preñada de sorpresas.

—¿Es «de» usted, entonces, de donde lo ha conseguido ella?

La mujer se divirtió con la momentánea confusión del hombre.

—¡Imagínese mi lucha! Ella cree en su triunfo. Creo que ha sido parte de su alegría.

—¡Oh, su alegría! —murmuró Strether con escepticismo.

—Bueno, ella piensa que ha tenido su oportunidad. ¿Y qué es esta noche para ella sino una especie de apoteosis? Su vestido está muy bien.

—¿Lo bastante bien para entrar en el cielo? Porque después de una auténtica apoteosis —prosiguió Strether—, no queda *sino* el cielo. Para Sarah no existe sino el mañana.

—¿Y quiere decir usted que no encontrará el mañana celestial?

—Bueno, quiero decir que esta noche me parece, respecto de ella, demasiado buena para ser cierta. Ya ha tenido su ración; es decir, tiene en este momento y está a punto de comerse la ración mayor y más sabrosa. Y no habrá ninguna otra. Ciertamente, yo no tengo ninguna. Como mucho, no puede ser sino Chad. —Strether siguió descifrando la situación como si se diera para común regalo—. El puede tener una y tan grande que podría ahogarle; sin embargo, se me ocurre que si la tuviera...

—¿No debería —comprendió la mujer— haber traído todo este embrollo? Es posible que no y, si se me permite ser franca, deseo ardientemente que no tenga ninguna. Desde luego, no haré ahora —añadió— como que no sé de qué se trata.

—Oh, me parece que ya lo sabe todo el mundo —admitió el bueno de Strether pensativamente— y sería extraño y divertido creer a todos los presentes sabiendo, observando y esperando.

—Sí... ¿verdad que sería divertido? —dijo la señorita Barrace—. Así *somos* en París. —A la mujer le complacía siempre añadir algo más a aquella rareza—. ¡Es maravilloso! Pero, entiéndame —afirmó—, todo depende de usted. No quiero ensañarme con usted, pero eso es prácticamente lo que ha dado a entender al alegar que estábamos encima de usted. Sabemos que es usted el protagonista del drama y nos hemos reunido para ver qué hará.

Strether la observó un momento con un entendimiento quizá un tanto anublado.

—Creo que por eso se ha refugiado el protagonista en este rincón. El héroe se asusta de su heroísmo... no está a la altura de su papel.

—Ah, pero todos creemos que seguirá interpretando. Por eso —prosiguió la señorita Barrace con

amabilidad— nos tomamos tanto interés en usted. Sabemos que estará usted a la altura de las circunstancias. —Y entonces, como pareciera que el hombre no acababa de entusiasmarse del todo—: No lo consienta.

—¿Que Chad se vaya?

—Exacto: reténgalo. Con todo esto —y señaló al multitudinario tributo— ya ha hecho suficiente. Le queremos: es encantador.

—Es muy hermosa —dijo Strether— la forma que tienen ustedes de simplificar las cosas cuando quieren.

Pero ella sabía cómo replicarle.

—No es nada en comparación con la forma en que usted convence cuando debe hacerlo.

El hombre parpadeó ante aquello como ante la misma voz de una profecía y quedó un momento callado. Retuvo a la mujer, sin embargo, cuando pareció ir a dejarle solo en la pausa más bien fría que se había hecho en la conversación.

—Francamente, esta noche no hay ni rastro de ningún héroe; el héroe escurre el bulto, falta a su deber, el héroe está avergonzado. En consecuencia, me parece, de quien deben ocuparse todos ustedes es de la heroína.

La señorita Barrace tardó un minuto en contestar.

—¿La heroína?

—La heroína. A quien —dijo Strether— nunca he tratado como a tal. Oh-dijo suspirando—, ¡qué mal lo hago!

Ella quiso tranquilizarle.

—Lo hace lo mejor que puede. —Y luego, tras otra vacilación—: Creo que está satisfecha.

Pero el hombre seguía compungido.

—Ni siquiera me he acercado a ella. Ni siquiera la he mirado.

—Ah, entonces no sabe usted lo que se ha perdido.

El hombre dio a entender que no lo ignoraba.

—¿Está más maravillosa que nunca?

—Más que nunca. Con el señor Pocock.

—Mme. de Vionnet... ¿con Jim? —preguntó Strether, sorprendido.

—Mme. de Vionnet... con «Jim». —La señorita Barrace era realista.

—¿Y qué hace con él?

—Ah, es a *él* a quien debe usted preguntar.

La cara de Strether se iluminó otra vez ante aquella idea.

—Será divertido. —Sin embargo seguía asombrado—. Pero ella tiene que saber algo.

—Desde luego: sabe un sinfín de cosas. La primera —dijo la señorita Barrace, balanceando los impertinentes— que interpreta un papel. Y su papel consiste en ayudarle *a usted.*

Parecía que nada hubiera ocurrido; los eslabones se soltaban, las conexiones se eludían, pero era como si, de repente, estuvieran tocando el meollo mismo del asunto.

—Sí; muchísimo más —reflexionó Strether con gravedad— que yo *a ella.* -Todo se le vino encima como con la inminente presencia de la belleza, la gracia, el intenso, simulado estado de ánimo con que él había sido, según él mismo decía, puesto fuera de contacto—. *Ella* es valiente.

—¡Ah, ella es valiente! —la señorita Barrace estaba muy de acuerdo; y fue como si, durante un momento, vislumbraran la magnitud en el rostro del otro.

Pero, a decir verdad, lo importante estaba presente.

—¡Cuánto más debe ella preocuparse!

—¡Ah, helo ahí. Ella se preocupa. Pero ¿no es como si —añadió la señorita Barrace con consideración— usted hubiera tenido sus dudas al respecto?

Strether, de súbito, quiso creer que realmente no las había tenido nunca.

—Bueno, por supuesto es la clave del asunto.

— *Voilà!*-exclamó la señorita Barrace sonriendo.

—Es la razón por la que uno se confiesa —prosiguió Strether—. Y es el motivo por el que uno se ha quedado tanto tiempo. Y es también —insistió— la razón de que uno se vaya a casa. Es la razón... la razón...

—¡Es la razón de todo! —convino ella—. Es la razón por la que ella puede tener esta noche, a pesar de lo que parezca y haga, y a pesar de cuanto haga su amigo «Jim», unos veinte años. Es otra de las cosas que sabe; quiere ser, para él, y quiere ser tan desenvuelta y encantadora como le sea posible, tan joven como una muchacha.

Strether contribuía a distancia.

—¿Para «él»? ¿Para Chad...?

—Para Chad, en cierto modo, siempre, claro. Pero en particular, esta noche, para el señor Pocock. —Y entonces, como su amigo siguiera absorto—: Sí, ¡es muy valiente! Pero tiene también otra cosa: un elevado sentido del deber. —La cosa estaba más que suficientemente ante ellos—. Cuando el señor Newsome tiene las manos tan ocupadas con su hermana...

—Lo mínimo que puede hacerse —continuó Stretheres... ¿que ella se ocupe del marido de la hermana? Sí, es lo mínimo. Así que se ha ocupado de él.

—Se ha ocupado de él. —Era todo lo que la señorita Barrace había querido decir.

Sin embargo, fue suficiente.

—Tiene que ser divertido.

—Oh. Es divertido. —Esto, naturalmente, encajaba en esencia.

Pero les hizo retroceder.

—¡Cuánto, en efecto, se preocupa! —En respuesta a lo cual, la interlocutora de Strether dejó caer iln comprensivo «¡Ah!», que acaso manifestara cierta impaciencia ante el tiempo que se tomaba el hombre para hacerse con ello. La mujer se había acostumbrado hacía un buen rato.

II

Cuando, una mañana, en la misma semana, se dio cuenta de que todo iba a caerle encima por fin, la inmediata sensación de Strether fue de alivio absoluto. Se había dado cuenta, aquella misma mañana, que algo iba a ocurrir: lo había sabido, en un momento, por el comportamiento de Waymarsh cuando éste se presentó ante él mientras desayunaba un café y un suizo en la pequeña y resbaladiza *salle à manger,* tan asociada ahora a las enjundiosas meditaciones. Strether había tomado allí últimamente algunas solitarias y abstraídas comidas; allí comulgaba, incluso a fines de junio, con un sospechoso escalofrío, el aire de viejos estremecimientos mezclado con viejos sabores, el aire en que tantas impresiones habían madurado con perversidad; el lugar, mientras tanto, le enviaba continuamente sus mensajes por la precisa circunstancia de que estaba solo. Allí pasaba la mayor parte del tiempo, suspirando suavemente, mientras inclinaba un tanto la *carafe,* a propósito de lo mucho mejor ocupado que estaba Waymarsh. Aquel era realmente su triunfo, según el patrón común: haber sabido guiar en todo momento a su compañero. recordaba que, al principio, apenas había habido un sitio polémico por donde le hubiera inducido a pasar; el último pronóstico anunciaba que, por lo menos, apenas había uno ante el que pudiera contener su precipitación. Su precipitación —como Strether se la representaba gráfica y humorísticamente— había desembocado en Sarah y contenía acaso, además, la clave de todo el enigma, estimulaba, con su delicada y sabrosa espuma, el principio fundamental, para bien o para mal, de su propia perspectiva, la perspectiva de Strether. Podía, al final, resultar sólo que se habían unido para salvarle y, ciertamente, por lo que a Waymarsh respectaba, esto *tenía* que ser el motor de la acción. Strether se alegraba, de todos modos, en relación con el caso, de que la salvación que él necesitaba no fuera más breve; lujo tan cabal no hacía, bajo determinadas luces, sino perfilarse a la plena luz. Había momentos en que se preguntaba muy seriamente si Waymarsh, gracias a una antigua amistad y una condescendencia lógica, haría tan buenas amistades en su nombre como las hacía para sí propio. No serían las mismas relaciones, por supuesto; pero podían tener la ventaja de que él, probablemente, no sería capaz de hacer ninguna en absoluto.

Nunca se quedaba, por la mañana, mucho rato, pero Waymarsh ya había bajado y, tras echar un vistazo al mal iluminado comedor, se le acercó con menos cordialidad que de costumbre. Se había asegurado, por la superficie de cristal que daba al jardín, de que estarían solos; de hecho, había algo en él que sabía medir el espacio. Vestía prendas de verano; y, salvo que su blanco chaleco quedaba chillón y excesivo, tales adminículos le favorecían, realzaban su expresión. Llevaba un sombrero de paja que su amigo aún no había visto en París y lucía una estupenda rosa en un ojal. Strether supo, en el acto, lo que le ocurría: que, en pie desde hacía una hora, la húmeda juventud del día, tan agradable, en aquella temporada, vibraba con la emoción de la aventura y había ido con la señora Pocock, indudablemente, al Marché aux Fleurs. Strether tenía plena conciencia, en la imagen que protagonizaba el amigo, de una alegría que tenía cierto parentesco con la envidia; tan inversas, mientras permanecía allí, parecían sus antiguas posiciones; tan relativamente triste se presentaba, por un rápido giro de la rueda de la fortuna, la situación del peregrino de Woollett. Se preguntaba, dicho peregrino, si él al principio habría dado a Waymarsh la impresión de audacia y de, bueno, de estar tan lanzado, como el segundo parecía tener el privilegio de dar en aquel momento. Recordaba que su amigo le había observado ya en Chester que su aspecto desmentía su alegato de abatimiento; pero en aquella situación habría sido difícil encontrar un aspecto menos vinculado con la inminencia del desastre que el de Waymarsh. Strether, en cualquier caso, nunca había tenido el aspecto de un colono sureño de los días gloriosos: pues tal era la imagen

pintorescamente sugerida por la afortunada combinación de la cara negruzca y el ancho panamá de su visitante. Este tipo, le gustaba considerar además, había sido, en relación con Waymarsh, el objeto de las atenciones de Sarah; estaba convencido de que el gusto femenino no había sido extraño a la ocurrencia y compra del sombrero, no más que culpables los delicados dedos de la mujer en la colocación de la rosa. Le vino a la cabeza, en medio de aquel flujo de pensamientos, pues cosas tan extrañas se le ocurrían, que *él* nunca se había levantado con las gallinas para acompañar a una mujer brillante al Marché aux Fleurs; esto no podía achacársele ni en relación con la señorita Gostrey ni con Mme. de Vionnet; la práctica de levantarse temprano para ir en busca de aventuras no podía, en modo alguno, imputársele. Se le ocurrió entonces que precisamente en esto radicaba su caso: siempre se le escapaban las cosas, gracias a su especial habilidad para no hacerse con ellas, mientras que los demás las atrapaban siempre gracias a un gesto distinto. Y eran los demás quienes parecían recatados y él el que daba la sensación de concupiscencia; era él, sin saber cómo, quien pagaba al final y los demás quienes se llevaban la mejor parte. Sí, acabarían conduciéndole al patíbulo y aún no sabría del todo para qué. En este sentido, casi se sentía ya en el patíbulo y, a decir verdad, se sentía más bien contento. Se le antojaba que *como* estaba ansioso... por este solo motivo Waymarsh estaba tan radiante. Era *su* excursión terapéutica, en cambio, lo que probaba el triunfo: que era, precisamente, lo que Strether, haciendo planes y esforzándose al máximo, había querido que fuera. Esta verdad brotaba ya de los labios del compañero; una amabilidad exhalada por ellos como con el calor del ejercicio y también, un poco, como con la animación de la prisa.

—La señora Pocock, que he dejado hace un cuarto de hora en el hotel, me ha pedido que te diga que le gustaría encontrarte aquí en casa dentro de una. hora aproximadamente. Quiere verte; tiene algo que decirte, o cree, me parece, que tú puedes tenerlo: de modo que le pregunté que por qué no venía directamente. No ha estado aquí todavía, a conocer nuestra morada; y me encargué de decirle que sin duda te encantaría recibirla. La cuestión, por tanto, ya lo ves, es quedarse aquí hasta que venga.

El aviso se había hecho con gentileza, aunque, según la costumbre de Waymarsh, con cierta solemnidad; pero Strether advirtió en él rápidamente otras cosas que los ligeros adornos. Era la primera muestra de que había una intención; lo que le aceleró el pulso; lo que no hacía sino poner de manifiesto, por fin, que habría tenido que agradecerlo de no haber sabido cuál era su posición. Había terminado el desayuno; lo apartó con la mano y se puso en pie. Había muchos elementos sorprendentes, pero sólo uno dudoso:

—¿La cuestión es que tú también esperes? —Waymarsh había sido un tanto ambiguo.

No fue ambiguo, sin embargo, después de esta pregunta; y la inteligencia de Strether no había abierto, sin duda, una boca tan ancha y efectiva como la que había de abrir durante los cinco minutos siguientes. No entraba en los deseos del amigo, al parecer, contribuir a la recepción de la señora Pocock; entendía a la perfección el ánimo con que iba a presentarse esta mujer, pero su relación con la visita se limitaba a su —bueno, por así decir— participación en la tarea de promoverla un poco. Había pensado, y hecho saber a ella, que Strether pensaría sin duda que ella ya había estado antes allí. En cualquier caso, según resultó, había deseado, desde hacía bastante, visitar el lugar.

—Le dije —dijo Waymarsh— que habría sido una brillante idea haberlo hecho antes.

Strether habló con tanta claridad que casi desconcertaba.

—Pero ¿por qué no lo ha hecho antes? Me ve todos los días: no tenía más que concertar una cita. No he hecho más que esperar.

—Bueno, le dije algo así. Y ella dijo que también ha estado esperando. —Se trataba, de la forma más rara del mundo, por lo que manifestaba aquel tono, de un Waymarsh nuevo, vivaz, acuciante, zalamero; un Waymarsh consciente con una conciencia distinta de la que ya había revelado y puesta en evidencia en aquel momento casi entre insinuaciones. No le faltaba más que tiempo para la persuasión absoluta y Waymarsh iba a comprender en un instante por qué. Mientras tanto, sin embargo, percibió nuestro amigo, anunciaba un paso de cierta magnanimidad de parte de la señora Pocock, de manera que podía desautorizar una pregunta brusca. De hecho, era su elevada intención suavizar al máximo las preguntas bruscas. Miraba a su camarada fijamente a los ojos y jamás había apreciado en ellos por tan silenciosos procedimientos tanta confianza y tan buen consejo. Todo lo que había entre ellos lo tenía otra vez ante sí, pero madurado, archivado y por último puesto a punto—. El caso es —añadió— que va a venir.

Considerando cuántas piezas tenían que encajar, todas entraron en el cerebro de Strether, en rápido y perfecto orden. Comprendió en el acto lo que había ocurrido y lo que probablemente ocurriría; y era más que gracioso. Fue, quizás, esta libertad apreciativa, precisamente, lo que culminó con un relampagueo de su buen ánimo.

—¿Para qué va a venir? ¿Para matarme?

—Viene para. ser muy, *muy* amable contigo y permíteme decir que tú no debes serlo menos con ella.

Esto lo había dicho Waymarsh con la seriedad de una advertencia y mientras permanecía inmóvil supo

Strether que no necesitaba sino un movimiento para adoptar la actitud de un hombre que recibe graciosamente un regalo. El regalo era el de la oportunidad que el viejo y querido Waymarsh se arrogaba de haber adivinado en él el leve dolor de no haber gozado todavía plenamente; así se lo había ofrecido, como en una pequeña bandeja de plata, con familiaridad, aunque también con delicadeza: sin ceremonias engorrosas; y había que inclinarse, sonreír y estar reconocido, había que aceptarlo, utilizarlo y dar las gracias. No había que pedir a uno —aquí radicaba su belleza— que se apartara demasiado de su propia dignidad. Ni extrañarse de que el viejo amigo floreciese en aquel aire suave de su propia hechura. A Strether le pareció por un momento que Sarah estaba, de hecho, paseándose fuera. ¿No rondaba acaso la *porte-cochère* mientras su amigo le preparaba la entrada? Strether no la recibiría sino para aceptarlo todo y todo discurriría del mejor modo en el mejor de los mundos posibles. Jamás había estado tan al tanto de las intenciones de una persona como, a la luz de aquella manifestación, lo estaba él de las de la señora Newsome. Habían pasado a Waymarsh por mediación de Sarah, pero habían pasado a Sarah por mano de su propia madre, de modo que no había ruptura en la cadena por la que pasaban *a él*.

—¿Ha ocurrido algo en particular —preguntó al cabo de un minuto— para esta decisión tan repentina? ¿Ha sabido ella algo inesperado de casa?

Waymarsh, al oír aquello, le pareció a él, se le quedó mirando con mayor fijeza que nunca.

—¿Inesperado? —Sufrió una breve vacilación; acto seguido, empero, habló con firmeza—. Nos vamos de París.

—¿Os vais? Eso sí es repentino.

Waymarsh manifestó una opinión distinta.

—Menos de lo que parece. El objeto de la visita de la señora Pocock es explicarte que no lo es.

Strether no sabía en absoluto si tenía de veras alguna ventaja, cualquiera con que pudiese contar como tal; pero disfrutaba por el momento —como si fuera la primera vez en su vida— de la sensación de haberla sacado. Se preguntó —lo que no era poco divertido— si se sentiría como se sienten los atrevidos.

—Aceptaré gustoso, de verdad, cualquier explicación. Recibiré a Sarah con sumo placer.

El destello sombrío apenas despuntó en los ojos de su camarada; pero le asombró su manera de desvanecerse. Estaba demasiado mezclado con otras impresiones, demasiado perfumado, por así decir, por el aroma de las flores. Y a decir verdad lo lamentó en el momento preciso: ¡querido destello sombrío! Algo sencillo y directo, algo pesado y hueco había desaparecido con él; algo por lo que había conocido mejor a su amigo. Waymarsh no sería su amigo, en cierto modo, sin el ocasional ornato de la ira de los justos, y el derecho a la ira de los justos —inestimablemente precioso para la simpatía de Strether— también parecía, sin saber cómo, del brazo de la señora Pocock, haberlo perdido. Strether recordaba la ocasión, a principios de su estancia, en que, en aquel mismo lugar, se había manifestado con un ávido y ominoso «¡Abandono!»: y, mientras lo recordaba, intuyó que le faltaba muy poco para decir él lo mismo. Waymarsh lo estaba pasando bien: ésta era la certeza que le atribulaba, y ello ocurría allí, ocurría en Europa y al amparo de circunstancias que en última instancia no aprobaba; todo lo cual le colocaba en una situación falsa, sin resultado posible: no, por lo menos, al gran estilo. Prácticamente al estilo de quien —casi al estilo del buen Strether— en vez de responsabilizarse de las cosas concentra sus esfuerzos en las justificaciones.

—No voy directamente a los Estados Unidos. El señor y la señora Pocock y la señorita Mamie, piensan hacer un breve viaje antes de volver y hemos hablado estos últimos días de unir nuestros contingentes. Nos hemos puesto de acuerdo y tomaremos el barco todos juntos a fines del mes que viene. Pero mañana mismo nos vamos a Suiza. La señora Pocock tiene necesidad de ver paisajes. No ha tenido ocasión de ver muchos.

También era valiente el estilo del amigo, que no ocultaba nada, confesaba todo lo que había y sólo dejaba a Strether la opción de determinadas conexiones.

—¿Es que la señora Newsome ha telegrafiado a su hija la orden de «abandonar»?

El gran estilo, ciertamente, ante aquello, asomó un tanto las orejas.

—Nada sé de los telegramas de la señora Newsome.

La mirada de ambos se cruzó entonces con cierta intensidad: durante cuyos escasos segundos ocurrió algo que no guardaba proporción con el tiempo empleado. Ocurrió que Strether, mientras observaba a su amigo, no estimó cierta la respuesta de éste: a consecuencia de lo cual ocurrieron otras cosas. Sí: Waymarsh *sabía* de los telegramas de la señora Newsome: ¿con qué otro objeto habían cenado juntos en Bignon's? Pareció a Strether por un momento que había sido a la misma señora Newsome a quien habían obsequiado con aquella cena; y, para el caso, que ella tenía que haberlo sabido y, por así decir, bendecido y consagrado. Sufrió la rápida y confusa imagen de telegramas diarios, preguntas, respuestas, consignas; más que clara fue la visión de los gastos en que exaltada, se disponía a incurrir la dama de Norteamérica. No menos vívido fue el recuerdo de lo que, en el curso de las prolongadas observaciones a que él le había sometido, habían costado a la mujer sus exaltaciones. Estaba claro que la mujer sufría ahora una de sus exaltaciones y Waymarsh, que se imaginaba pisando terreno firme, no estaba sino suspendido en el aire de la factura

femenina. Todas las referencias del informe masculino le indicaban que la mujer había condescendido ya con un trato cordial con el individuo, aunque nada la había despojado tanto de una especial aureola de consideración.

—¿No sabes —preguntó— si Sarah ha recibido instrucciones tendentes a que yo vaya también a Suiza?

—No sé nada —dijo Waymarsh con la mayor gallardía que pudo— de los asuntos privados de esta mujer, aunque la creo actuando en conformidad con hechos que me merecen el mayor de los respetos. —Máxima gallardía hubo, pero siempre con el mismo estilo: como tenía que ser la comunicación de tan triste informe. Él lo sabía todo, intuía Strether cada vez con mayor intensidad, todo lo que de aquella forma negaba, y su pequeño castigo era ni más ni menos que estar condenado a una segunda mentira. ¿Qué posición más falsa, teniendo en cuenta al individuo, podía pedir el más vengativo? Terminó por forcejear en un brete que, tres meses atrás, sin duda habría salvado fácilmente—. La señora Pocock estará probablemente preparada para dar satisfacción a cualquier pregunta que le hagas. Pero —continuó—, *¡pero...!-Y* aquí se quedó trabado.

—¿Pero qué? ¿Que no le haga demasiadas?

Waymarsh parecía generoso, pero el daño ya estaba hecho; no pudo, pareciera lo que pareciese, por menos de sonrojarse.

—No hagas ninguna que puedas lamentar.

Era una atenuación, supuso Strether, de otra cosa que había tenido en la punta de la lengua; era una brusca caída en el terreno del lenguaje directo y por tanto tenía la voz de la sinceridad. Había caído en el tono suplicante y esto, inmediatamente, para nuestro amigo, había mutado el juicio y rehabilitado al amigo. Estaban en el mismo nivel de comunicación en que habían estado, aquella primera mañana, en el salón de Sarah y en presencia de ésta y de Mme. de Vionnet; y el aprecio de una buena voluntad inmensa era otra vez, a fin de cuentas, posible. Sólo que la cantidad de información que Waymarsh había dado entonces por supuesta se había duplicado y decuplicado ya. Lo que quedó patente cuando dijo:

—Desde luego, no hace falta decir que espero que vengas con nosotros. —Fue entonces cuando las implicaciones y expectativas encerradas en el amigo parecieron a Strether casi sentimentalmente grandiosas.

El segundo le dio unas palmaditas en el hombro mientras le daba las gracias y declinaba la cuestión de unirse a los Pocock; manifestó la alegría que sentía al verle otra vez tan arrojado y desenvuelto, y, de hecho, casi se despidió allí mismo.

—Por supuesto, volveremos a vernos antes de que te vayas; pero antes quisiera agradecerte lo mucho que has hecho al disponer de manera tan apropiada lo que me has dicho. Voy a dar un paseo por el jardín, por ese pequeño y querido jardín que tanto hemos frecuentado durante estos dos últimos meses, para solaz de nuestros arrebatos y desánimos, de nuestras dudas y resoluciones; en él estaré, lleno de impaciencia y nerviosismo, házselo saber a Sarah, por favor, hasta que ella tenga la bondad de venir. Déjame a solas con ella sin temor —y lanzó una carcajada—; te juro que no le haré ningún daño. No creo tampoco que ella me haga ningún daño a mí; estoy en una situación en que el dolor, desde hace algún tiempo, ya no tiene importancia. Además, no es *eso lo* que te preocupa... ¡no, no digas nada! Todos estamos perfectamente, lo que no era sino la cantidad de buen término que pedíamos para nuestra aventura. Al parecer no estábamos muy bien antes; pero nos hemos recuperado, teniendo en cuenta todo lo sucedido, en seguida. Deseo que lo pases muy bien en los Alpes.

Waymarsh alzó los ojos para mirarle, como si estuviera a sus pies.

—Creo que no *debo* ir.

Era la conciencia de Milrose con la misma voz de Milrose, pero ¡oh!, tan débil e indecisa. Strether se sintió avergonzado de pronto por él y procuró alentarle.

—No: debes ir, debes ir... en cualquier dirección que te sea grata. Vivimos horas preciosas, que no pueden repetirse a nuestra edad. Que no tengas que decirte en Milrose, el próximo invierno, que no tuviste valor para afrontarlas. —Y entonces, como su compañero le mirase con extrañeza—: Dedícate a la señora Pocock

—¿Que me dedique a ella?

—Le eres de una gran ayuda.

Waymarsh contempló aquello como si se tratase de algo desagradable, aunque indudablemente cierto, y que, sin embargo, resultaba irónico decir.

—Es más de lo que tú tienes, entonces.

—Esa es precisamente tu oportunidad y tu ventaja. Además —dijo Strether—, yo también contribuyo a mi manera. Sé lo que quiero.

Waymarsh no se había quitado el enorme panamá y, encontrándose ya junto a la puerta, su última mirada, sombreada por aquél, había regresado a la oscuridad y la alarma.

—¡Yo también! Escucha, Strether...

—Sé lo que vas a decir. ¡Abandónalo todo!

—¡Lo abandono todo! —Pero la frase careció de la antigua intensidad; nada de ésta quedaba ya; y desapareció de la estancia con el hombre.

III

Casi lo primero, sobradamente extraño, que, aproximadamente una hora más tarde, se sorprendió haciendo Strether en presencia de Sarah fue hacer una clara observación a propósito del fracaso, en el amigo común, de lo que había sido al parecer su gran distinción. Era como si —cosa a la que aludió, naturalmente, al gran estilo— el querido compañero la hubiera sacrificado en busca de algún otro beneficio; que sólo él, por supuesto, tendría que calcular. Es posible que físicamente estuviera mucho más sano que cuando su primera salida. Era todo tan prosaico, tan relativamente triunfalista y vulgar. Pero, por fortuna, si se reparaba en ello, la mejoría era tan grande que carecía de importancia el precio que hubiera pagado.

—Tú sola, querida Sarah —se decidió Strether a decir— le has hecho, me parece, en estas tres semanas, mucho más bien que el resto de su tiempo junto.

Era una decisión porque, en cierto modo, el orden referencial era, dadas las circunstancias, divertido, y más divertido aún por la actitud de Sarah, por la transformación que los acontecimientos habían producido en el aspecto de la mujer. Este aspecto era, a decir verdad, lo más gracioso de todo: el ánimo que le adivinó por estar allí en cuanto estuvo allí, el esbozo de oscuridad que se aclaró para el hombre en cuanto estuvo sentado con ella en el pequeño *salon de lecture* que había, casi siempre, durante todas aquellas semanas, presenciado el desvanecimiento del entusiasmo de sus primeras conversaciones con Waymarsh. Era inmenso, del todo tremendo que la mujer hubiera acudido: esta verdad se abrió paso en el hombre a pesar de haber alcanzado ya, por sí solo, una diáfana imagen al respecto. El hombre había hecho exactamente lo que había prometido a Waymarsh: había paseado por el jardín mientras esperaba la llegada de la mujer; e intensificado, con aquel ejercicio, unas luces que se le antojaban ya inundando la escena. La mujer se había decidido a dar aquel paso para dar al hombre la oportunidad de dudar, a fin de estar en situación de decir a su madre que había, incluso hasta la bajeza, allanado el camino del hombre. La duda consistía en si el hombre comprendería o no dicho allanamiento: y la advertencia había venido probablemente del más despegado espíritu de Waymarsh. Waymarsh, en cualquier caso, sin que cupiera ninguna duda, había hecho sentir su peso en la balanza: y había señalado la importancia de ahorrar al amigo todo perjuicio. La mujer había sido equitativa con el ruego y no lo iba a ser menos con un elevado ideal que se había acomodado en su situación contemporánea. El cálculo femenino se reflejaba con notoriedad en la inmovilidad en que mantenía su larga sombrilla, recta y derecha, y en la extensión del brazo, que daba la sensación de que había elegido aquel lugar para plantar su bandera; en las diversas precauciones que tomaba para no mostrarse nerviosa; en la agitada calma con que se limitaba a esperarle. Las dudas abandonaron el terreno de la posibilidad desde el momento en que el hombre comprendió que la mujer no había ido a verle con ninguna propuesta; que su interés consistía únicamente en poner de manifiesto lo que había ido a recibir. Había ido a recibir su sumisión y Waymarsh tenía que haberle aclarado que la mujer no esperaría ni una molécula menos. El anfitrión de la dama comprendía infinidad de materias en aquel escenario apropiado; pero una de las que comprendía con mayor claridad era que el nervioso amigo no le había tendido la mano solicitada. Waymarsh le había deslizado por el contrario la petición de que la mujer tuviera oportunidad de encontrar al hombre apacible y mientras paseaba por el jardín, antes de la aparición femenina, Strether había calculado con celo las diversas posibilidades de tal estado. La dificultad estribaba en que si él se mostraba apacible no estaría a la altura de las intenciones femeninas. Si ella le quería lúcido y consciente —como toda ella parecía pedir a gritos—, ella no debía, por consiguiente, escatimar nada para que fuera así. Consciente estaba, la verdad sea dicha, sólo que de demasiadas cosas. De modo que la mujer debía elegir la que quería.

Sin embargo, prácticamente se puso de manifiesto ella sola al final y cuando esto hubo ocurrido ambos se encontraban de lleno en el núcleo mismo de la vicisitud. A decir verdad, cualquier cosa habría servido; cuando Strether había sacado a relucir la partida de Waymarsh, que necesariamente había hecho referencia a la idéntica intención de la señora Pocock, quedó a un paso de la lucidez suprema. Después de esto hubo, ciertamente, una luz tan intensa que Strether, sin duda, no habría sino descubierto a medias, ante el prodigioso resplandor, por cuál de las dos se había visto precipitado en realidad el asunto. Era, en el reducido espacio que ocupaban, como si entre los dos hubiera caído algo estrepitosamente al suelo. La sumisión masculina era un convenio que había que aceptar en el plazo de veinticuatro horas.

—Se irá en seguida si usted habla con él: me ha jurado por su honor que lo hará así. —Esto sucedió,

atendiendo al orden y a propósito de Chad, después del derrumbe. Y ocurrió repetidas veces durante el tiempo que se tomó Strether para saber que su rigor era más inamovible de lo que había supuesto: tiempo que no dilató ni un segundo diciendo a la mujer que tal forma de plantear las cosas, de parte de su hermano, le sorprendía bastante. La mujer no era ya graciosa al final: era elegante y el hombre adivinó con facilidad en qué punto era fuerte, fuerte para sí propia. Aún no se le había ocurrido pensar que la mujer era oficiosa en nobleza y cortesía. Actuaba en nombre de un interés mayor y más diáfano que el de su pobre y humilde persona, pobre y humilde equilibrio parisiense, y toda la lucidez del hombre tocante al apremio moral de la madre de la mujer se veía beneficiada por aquella prueba de sus fuerzas de sostén. La mujer se sostendría; se fortalecería; no hacía falta que el hombre se intranquilizara por ella. Lo que habría sido una vez más claro y distinto para él, de haberlo procurado, era que, como todo el apremio moral se reducía esencialmente a la señora Newsome, la presencia de este elemento era casi idéntica a la presencia material de la mujer. No es que él sintiera que estaba tratando directamente con ella, pero sí, sin duda, como si ella estuviera tratando directamente con *él.* Ella le alcanzaba, de algún modo, mediante la prolongación del brazo intencional y en este sentido el hombre tenía que tenerla en cuenta. Pero él, a cambio, no la alcanzaba a ella y ella, en consecuencia, no le tenía en cuenta a él; no alcanzaba sino a Sarah, que parecía tenerle en cuenta muy poco.

—Está claro que algo ha ocurrido entre tú y Chad —dijo él entonces—, tanto que me parece que tengo que saber un poco más al respecto. ¿Lo dejó todo —añadió sonriendo— en mis manos?

—¿No viniste a París —preguntó ella— para ponerlo todo en las *suyas?*

Pero él no replicó a esto más que, al cabo de un instante, diciendo:

—Oh, está bien. Quiero decir que Chad ha hecho bien en decirte... bueno, lo que te haya dicho. Aceptaré... lo que él me confíe. Pero antes de decirte nada tengo que hablar con él.

La mujer vaciló, pero dijo en seguida:

—¿Es totalmente necesario que volvamos a vernos?

—Sí, si quiero decirte definitivamente lo que pienso al respecto.

—¿Pretendes pues —replicó ella— que siga tratándote sólo para exponerme a una nueva humillación?

El hombre observó a la mujer durante un buen rato.

—¿Tienes instrucciones de la señora Newsome de romper conmigo, incluso en el peor de los casos, de manera definitiva e irreversible?

—Las instrucciones que he recibido de la señora Newsome son, con tu permiso, asunto mío. Sabes muy bien cuáles fueron las que tú recibiste y puedes juzgar por ti mismo las consecuencias de haberlas seguido como lo has hecho. Comprenderás, en cualquier caso, que si no quiero arriesgarme yo, menos voy a arriesgarla a *ella.* -Había dicho más de lo que ella misma había esperado; pero, aunque ya se había recuperado, el color de su tez manifestaba al hombre que, de un momento a otro, se enteraría de lo que faltaba. A decir verdad, consideraba de capital importancia enterarse de una vez—. ¿De qué otra forma puede calificarse tu conducta-estalló la mujer, a modo de explicación—, de qué otra forma sino de ultraje a mujeres como *nosotras?* Me refiero a tu forma de comportarte, como si cupiera alguna duda, entre nosotras y la otra, de cuál es su deber.

El hombre meditó un momento. Era demasiado para enfocarlo de una sola vez; no sólo lo dicho, sino el peligroso abismo que revelaba.

—Naturalmente, son dos tipos distintos de deber.

—¿Y pretendes decirme que tiene alguno... para con la otra?

—¿Te refieres a Mme. de Vionnet? —Pronunció el nombre, no para enfrentarse a ella, sino para ganar tiempo otra vez: tiempo que necesitaba para comprender algo bien distinto y mayor que la petición de un momento antes. No pudo entender en seguida todo lo que había en la actitud de la mujer; pero cuando lo hizo se descubrió probando un sonido, bajo y vago, un sonido que era tal vez lo más cercano a un gruñido que sus cuerdas vocales conocían. Todos los fracasados esfuerzos para dar un indicio a la señora Pocock de que se había operado un cambio en Chad, todo lo que había contribuido a este fracaso se le antojaba un fardo grande y mal atado que le habían arrojado, con las palabras de la mujer, a la cara. El proyectil le había cortado el aliento; situación de la que, sin embargo, se recuperaba ya—. Bueno, cuando una mujer es al mismo tiempo tan encantadora y tan caritativa...

—¿Puedes sacrificar a ella a madres y hermanas sin ruborizarte, y hacerles cruzar el océano con las mejores intenciones para arrancarte la verdad? *¿Cómo* te atreves?

Sí, se había hecho cargo de la situación de aquella forma tan rápida y tajante; pero no quería debatirse en su acoso.

—Me parece que nada de cuanto he hecho tiene nada que ver con lo que has descrito de forma tan minuciosa. Todo ha sucedido sin que pudiera diferenciarse del resto de los acontecimientos. Tu venida está íntimamente vinculada con mi venida anterior y que yo viniese se debió a nuestro estado de ánimo general.

Nuestro estado de ánimo general había surgido, a su vez, de nuestra divertida ignorancia, de nuestros divertidos prejuicios y confusiones: de los que, desde entonces, un inexorable río de luz parece habernos hecho flotar en nuestro quizá más gracioso conocimiento de las cosas. ¿No te gusta tu hermano tal como es —prosiguió— y no has informado cumplidamente a tu madre de todo lo que ha sucedido?

También aquello, el tono masculino, supuso para la mujer, sin duda, demasiadas cosas; este habría sido el caso por lo menos de no haber encontrado apoyo la mujer en la pregunta final. Todo, en la etapa en que se encontraban, venía en socorro directo de la mujer porque todo revelaba en el hombre tal presupuesto intencional. Comprendió éste —¡y cuántas rarezas ocurrían!— que se le habría tenido por menos monstruoso de haber sido un poco menos civilizado. Lo que lo dejaba al desnudo era precisamente la triste triquiñuela de su tranquilidad interior, lo que lo dejaba al desnudo era que *pensaba* en tal ofensa. No tenía, sin embargo, el deseo de ofender que Sarah le imputaba, y no podía por el momento sino contemporizar, con la indignante descripción femenina. La mujer estaba más irritada de lo que él había esperado y probablemente entendería mejor la situación cuando supiera lo que había ocurrido entre ella y Chad. Mientras tanto, la concepción femenina de las particulares tinieblas del hombre, la manifiesta sorpresa femenina ante la negativa del hombre a coger el cable que se le echaba tenían que pasar por extravagancia.

—Felicítate tú solo —replicó ella— de que esode que hablas sea obra tuya. ¡Que algo así haya de decirse con tan bonitas palabras...! —Pero se contuvo y su comentario hubo de sonar con claridad absoluta —. ¿Crees que ella es una excusa para una mujer decente?

¡Ah, por fin salía! Había puesto el dedo en la llaga de una manera más violenta que, en sus confusas intenciones, lo hubiera hecho el hombre; pero, en esencia, allí estaba por fin. Era tanto, tanto...; y ella lo estimaba, pobre mujer, en tan poco. Se percató el hombre, pues estaba ya preparado para ello, de la presencia de una extraña sonrisa y acto seguido se sorprendió hablando como la señorita Barrace.

—Desde el principio me pareció maravillosa. He pensado además, que, al fin y al cabo, probablemente representaría para vosotros algo más bien nuevo y beneficioso.

Con lo que no vino a dar a la señora Pocock sino su mejor — oportunidad para la mofa.

—¿Más bien nuevo? ¡Lo deseo de todo corazón!

—Quiero decir —explicó él— que habría podido encantaros con su exquisita amabilidad... una auténtica revelación, según me pareció a mí; su elevada singularidad, su distinción en todos los sentidos.

El hombre había sido, con tales palabras, y a sabiendas, un tanto «precioso»; pero había tenido que serlo: no podía decir a la mujer la verdad del caso sin ellas; y sede antojaba, además, que no importaba ya. En última instancia no había servido a su causa, pues la mujer saltó ante lo manifestado.

—¿Una «revelación» para *mí?* ¿He de considerar a ésa una revelación? ¿Y hablas de «distinción», precisamente *tú,* que has gozado de ciertos derechos... cuando la mujer más distinguida que hayamos visto nunca recibe esta mjuria, en su soledad, gracias a tu increíble comparación?

Strether procuraba, con un esfuerzo, no extraviarse; y miraba continuamente a su alrededor.

—¿Ha dicho tu madre que se siente injuriada?

La respuesta de Sarah fue tan directa, tan «oportuna», que habría podido decirse, que el hombre comprendió su origen al instante.

—Mi madre ha confiado a mi criterio y mi ternura la manifestación de su parecer y el cuidado de su dignidad personal.

Eran ni más ni menos que palabras de la dama de Woollett: las habría reconocido entre mil; aquel compartir la responsabilidad con la hija. La señora Pocock, en consecuencia, hablaba en este sentido de memoria y el hecho conmovió desmedidamente al hombre.

—Si piensas como das a entender, es, desde luego, francamente terrible. Cualquiera podría asegurar que he dado pruebas de sobra —añadió— de mi profunda admiración por la señora Newsome.

—¿Y podrías decirme qué prueba consideraría cualquiera suficiente? ¿Acaso la de suponer que esta persona de aquí es muy superior a ella?

El hombre volvió a sorprenderse; y esperó.

—Ah, querida Sarah, a esta persona debes *dejármela* a mí.

Deseoso de evitar las observaciones vulgares, para mostrar que, incluso perversamente, seguía siendo fiel a sus pautas racionales, había estado a punto de convertir la petición en lamento. Sabía sin embargo que era quizá la afirmación más tajante que había hecho en su vida y el enfoque que le dispensó la visita le otorgó prácticamente esta importancia.

—Eso es precisamente lo que voy a hacer con mucho gusto. ¡Dios sabe que no la queremos! Y guárdate de discutir —observó con tesitura más elevada todavía— lo que pienso de la vida de ellos. Si estimas que es algo de lo que se puede *hablar,* te felicito por tu tacto.

La vida a que había aludido era, por supuesto, la de Chad y la de Mme. de Vionnet, que conjuntó de una manera que hizo parpadear al hombre un poco, no dejándole otra cosa que la conjetura de las

intenciones femeninas. Fue sin embargo ilación propia que mientras que había disfrutado durante semanas de la presencia de los actos escuetos de tan brillante mujer, tuviera que sufrir ahora de otros labios una caracterización de aquéllos.

—Opino lo mejor de esta mujer y me da la sensación al mismo tiempo de que su «vida» es algo que, a decir verdad, no me incumbe. Es decir, me incumbe sólo en la medida en que la vida de Chad se ve afectada por ella; y lo que ha ocurrido, ¿no lo comprendes?, es que Chad se ha visto afectado de la manera más hermosa del mundo. Y la mejor prueba de una confitura es comérsela —procuró, sin grandes resultados, ayudarse con este detalle doméstico, mientras la mujer le dejaba hablar como si cada vez estuviera más hundido. Continuó, sin embargo, con largueza, con tanta como supo sin un nuevo consejo; a decir verdad, no se decidiría del todo mientras no restableciese el contacto con Chad. No obstante, siempre podía hablar en nombre de la mujer a quien con tanta firmeza había prometido «salvar». No tenía aquello, para ella, el aire de una salvación; pero como el escalofrío suscitado calaba cada vez más hondo, ¿en qué podía convertirse sino en un momento de que uno podía, en el peor de los casos, perecer *con* ella? Y era bastante sencillo: era rudimentario; no, no la traicionaría.

—Veo en ella más méritos de los que sin duda tendrías paciencia para oír. ¿Y sabes el efecto que me produce —preguntó— que hables de ella en tales términos? Es como si tuvieras alguna razón para no admitir todo lo que ella ha hecho por tu hermano y cerrases los ojos a ambas caras de la moneda con el fin de, salga la que saliere, soslayar la otra. No entiendo, permíteme que te lo diga, cómo puedes, con el pretexto del recato, soslayar la que te afecta tanto.

—¿Afectarme... *eso?* —*y* alzó la cabeza de tal modo que bien habría podido parar en seco cualquier aproximación.

Por lo menos mantuvo al compañero a distancia, que respetó durante unos instantes la pausa. Luego, con un último esfuerzo por convencerla, la salvó.

—¿Acaso no te das cuenta, por tu vida, de la afortunada evolución de Chad?

—¿Afortunada? —repitió la mujer—. Y, a decir verdad, estaba ya preparada—. Para mí es repugnante.

Durante unos minutos la partida de la mujer había parecido inminente y de hecho se encontraba ya en la puerta que daba al patio, desde cuyo umbral había emitido aquel juicio. Sonó tan alto que pareció acallar todo lo demás durante unos momentos. El mismo Strether, a consecuencia de lo mismo, se había desanimado un poco; se daba cuenta y era más que suficiente.

—Oh, si es *así* como piensas...

—¿Hemos terminado entonces? Mucho mejor. Sí, así es como pienso. —Cruzó la puerta mientras hablaba y recorrió en línea recta el jardín, más allá del cual, separado de ellos por el amplio arco de la *porte-cochère,* el pequeño victoria que la había conducido al hotel permanecía estacionado. Se dirigía la mujer a él con decisión, y la forma de su partida, el agudo dardo de su réplica tuvieron una intensidad que habían parado en seco al hombre al principio. Se había despachado a gusto con él después de tenerlo en la cuerda floja y le costó un rato recuperarse de la sensación de derrota absoluta. No se trataba de la sorpresa; era, en mayor medida, la certeza; ya que, en definitiva, se había enfocado su situación como sólo él la había enfocado hasta el momento. En cualquier caso, la mujer se alejaba ya; se había distanciado de él, más bien de un gran salto, consecuencia de la soberbia y la tranquilidad, al fin y al cabo; había subido al carruaje sin que él pudiera detenerla y el vehículo estaba ya en movimiento. Se detuvo en seco; se encontraba en el jardín, limitándose a verla partir y sabiendo que no volvería a verla. La forma en que se había conducido él había tendido a que *pudiera* ponerse punto final a aquello. Cada uno de los movimientos de la mujer, en aquella decidida ruptura, confirmaban, reforzaban dicha idea. Sarah desapareció en la soleada calle, mientras, detenido en el centro de su confinamiento relativamente en sombras, el hombre se limitaba a observar el paisaje que tenía ante sí. Probablemente había terminado todo.

IV

Se dirigió bien entrada la noche al Boulevard Malesherbes, contando ya con la impresión de que habría sido inútil ir temprano y, además, repetidas veces en el curso del día, con algunas consultas en la portería. Chad no había vuelto y no había dejado ninguna indicación; al parecer tenía cosas que hacer en aquella coyuntura —como supuso Strether que también él podía tener— que le obligaban a ausentarse tanto de su casa. Nuestro amigo había preguntado ya en el hotel de la Rue de Rivoli, pero la única satisfacción que se le dio fue que todos se habían marchado. Con la idea de que el joven volvería a casa a dormir, Strether subió a sus habitaciones, de las cuales, sin embargo, seguía ausente, por más que, un momento después, a través del balcón, oyera el visitante las campanadas de las once. El criado de Chad le había dado cuenta ya de su reaparición; el joven, supo el visitante, había llegado a todo correr para cambiarse para la cena y se había

ido en seguida. Strether estuvo esperándola una hora: una hora llena de extrañas sugerencias, convicciones y momentos reflexivos; una de las que recordaría, al final de su aventura, como el particular manojo que más había contado. La más agradable de las lámparas y el más cómodo de los sillones habían sido puestos a su disposición por Baptiste: el más sutil de los criados; la novela medio intensa, la novela de color limón, sensible, con el cuchillo de marfil cruzado como una daga en el cabello de una campesina, habían quedado dentro del cálido círculo, un círculo que, por alguna razón, afectó a Strether con una calidez aún mayor después de que el mismo Baptiste hubiera observado que, si Monsieur no necesitaba nada más, se retiraría a su cuarto. La noche era calurosa y agobiante y aquella lámpara bastaba; el gran resplandor de la ciudad iluminada, que se elevaba a las alturas, amortiguándose a lo lejos, brotaba con fuerza del Bonlevard y, a través del difuso paisaje de los sucesivos lugares, permitía la contemplación de los objetos y hablaba de la dignidad de éstos. Strether se sintió poseído como nunca; había estado allí solo otras veces, había observado libros y grabados, había invocado, en ausencia de Chad, el espíritu del lugar, pero nunca a la hora de la magia ni con aquella sensación de dolor íntimo.

Pasó un buen rato en el balcón; se acomodó como había visto hacer al pequeño Bilham el primer día que llegara a aquella casa y como había visto hacer a Mamie el día en que el pequeño Bilham acaso la hubiera visto desde la calle; entró en las habitaciones, en las tres que daban a la fachada y que se comunicaban entre sí por anchas puertas; y, mientras paseaba y descansaba, procuraba resucitar la impresión que le habían producido tres meses atrás, aprehender de nuevo la voz con que parecían haberle hablado. Dicha voz, vino a advertir, apenas si alcanzaba a oírse; lo que tomaba como prueba de todo lo que él había cambiado. Había oído, otrora, sólo lo que había podido oír; lo único que podía hacer en aquel momento era pensar en tres meses atrás como en un mojón del lejano pretérito. Las voces se habían hecho más consistentes y más significativas; le salían al paso y le rodeaban a medida que se desplazaba: era su forma de hablar de consuno lo que le impedía estar inmóvil. Se sentía, extrañamente, tan triste como si hubiera ido allí para cometer alguna infamia y sin embargo tan emocionado como si hubiera ido en busca de un poco de libertad. Pero la libertad era lo que más abundaba en el lugar y en la hora; era la libertad lo que más le había hecho recuperar la juventud tanto tiempo añorada. No habría sabido explicar a aquellas alturas por qué la había echado en falta o por qué, al cabo de tantos años, se preocupaba por ello; la principal verdad de aquella invocación a todo era, sin embargo, que todo representaba la esencia de su pérdida, la ponía al alcance de la mano, bajo su tacto, la hacía, hasta un punto insospechado, objeto de sus sentidos. Esto era lo que se había convertido para él, en aquel singular momento, la juventud tanto tiempo añorada: una presencia extraña y concreta, llena de misterio y sin embargo llena de realidad, que podía tocar, gustar, oler y cuyo poderoso aliento alcanzaba a oír. Estaba en el exterior lo mismo que en el interior; estaba en la larga observación desde el balcón, en la noche estival de la dilatada vida nocherniega de París, en el incesante rumor, suave y c*élere,* de los iluminados coches que, con su velocidad, le sugerían siempre a los jugadores que había visto hacía tiempo en Montecarlo abriéndose paso hasta las mesas. Tenía aquella imagen ante sí cuando por fin se percató de que a Chad lo tenía detrás.

—Me ha dicho ella que lo has puesto todo en mis manos... —no había tardado en llegar a esta información que, sin embargo, enfocaba la situación más o menos como el joven pareció querer dejarla por el momento. Teniendo en cuenta que prácticamente tenían toda la noche por delante, se abordaron otros temas que tuvieron, asimismo, el raro efecto de hacer de la ocasión, en vez de precipitada y febril, uno de los más tranquilos, liberales y cómodos momentos que toda la aventura de Strether había de compartir con él. Había buscado a Chad desde hacía horas y no lo había encontrado más que en aquel instante; pero en aquel instante la demora quedaba compensada por el hecho de estar juntos en situación tan excepcional. Se habían visto, desde luego, en multitud de ocasiones; desde la primera noche en el teatro no habían hecho más que encarar el problema común; pero nunca habían estado solos como en aquel momento estaban y sus palabras nunca se habían centrado en ellos dos solos de manera tan intensa. Y si muchas cosas se dieron, además, mientras hablaban, ninguna se dio de forma tan clara para Strether como la chocante verdad a propósito de Chad, de la que tan a menudo se había sentido movido a tomar nota: la verdad de que todo volvía a él felizmente para aprender a vivir. Había estado en su agradable sonrisa, agradable exactamente en la medida justa, cuando el visitante se dio la vuelta, en el balcón, para saludar al recién llegado; el visitante, en efecto, advirtió allí mismo que de nada serviría tanto aquel encuentro como para dar testimonio de aquel expediente. Se rindió, en consecuencia, ante virtud tan reconocida; pues ¿cuál era el sentido de dicho expediente sino que los demás tenían que entregarse? No quería, por fortuna, impedir a Chad que viviera; pero sabía muy bien que si lo hiciera se rompería en pedazos. Y si quería que su vida personal tuviera una función auxiliadora ante el joven era totalmente necesario mantenerse de una pieza. Y lo importante, por encima de todo, el síntoma que señalaba la medida absoluta en que Chad poseía el conocimiento en cuestión era que, en tal situación, convertíase uno, no sólo con justa alegría, sino también con sincero impulso espontáneo, en el proveedor de su discurso. La conversación, por consiguiente, no

había durado tres minutos sin que Strether advirtiera la ratificación de la excitación en que había discurrido su espera. La impresión se hizo más intensa, más insistente, a medida que se percataba de la pequeñez de lo que pudiera corresponderle en el caso de su amigo. Que era exactamente la felicidad del caso del amigo; éste «ponía a secar» su excitación, o la emoción que el asunto le suscitara, como tendía la ropa recién lavada; nada podía ser mejor para el orden doméstico. Bastaba a Strether, en suma, intuir un analogía personal con la lavandera que llevaba a casa los triunfos del rodillo.

Cuando le hubo informado de la visita de Sarah, lo que hizo extensamente, Chad respondió a su pregunta con total inocencia.

—La remití a usted directamente, le dije que era imprescindible que le hablara. Esto fue anoche y todo ocurrió en diez minutos. Fue nuestra primera conversación sincera, a decir verdad la primera vez que me abordaba de plano. Sabía ella que yo no ignoraba cuál había sido su conducta con usted; sabía, además, lo poco que había hecho usted para dificultarle el camino. De modo que le hablé en nombre de usted con franqueza: le aseguré que usted estaba totalmente a su disposición. Y le dije que yo también —prosiguió el joven—; y le indiqué que en cualquier momento podía disponer de mí. Su impedimento ha sido no dar con la ocasión con que había soñado.

—Su impedimento —replicó Strether— no ha sido ni más ni menos que saber que te tiene miedo. Sarah no me teme *a mí,* ni por asomo; y cuando se percató de que yo me echaba a temblar sólo de pensar en ello, se dio cuenta de que ésa era su mejor oportunidad para intranquilizarme al máximo. Creo que en el fondo está tan complacida por haberte confiado a mí como tú, sin duda.

—Pero, hombre de Dios, ¿qué he hecho yo —preguntó Chad para protestar contra la lucidez del amigo — para que Sally me tenga miedo?

—Haber sido «maravilloso, maravilloso», como solemos decir los pobres diablos que vemos los toros desde la barrera; esto es lo que, de manera admirable, la ha puesto así. Y la ha puesto así con tanta más efectividad cuanto que veía que tú no lo hacías a propósito. Quiero decir la provocación de su miedo.

Chad echó una complicada mirada retrospectiva sobre sus posibilidades motivadoras.

—Yo sólo quería ser amable y cordial, honrado y atento... y es lo único que quiero ser todavía.

Strether sonrió ante aquella tranquilizadora lucidez.

—Bueno, parece que no hay mejor forma de conseguirlo que aceptando yo la responsabilidad. Reduce al máximo tus fricciones personales y tu propia incomodidad.

¡Ah, pero Chad, con su más generosa concepción de lo cordial, no iba a tener bastante con esto! Habían permanecido en el balcón, donde, tras aquella jornada de intenso y prematuro calor, el aire de medianoche era delicioso; y se apoyaban, de espaldas, en la balaustrada, en total armonía con las sillas y las macetas, los cigarrillos y la luz de las estrellas.

—La responsabilidad no es de *usted*... después de haber acordado esperar y juzgar juntos. Esto fue lo único que dije a Sally —prosiguió Chad—, que hemos estado, que estamos juzgando juntos.

—No me asusta la carga —explicó Strether—. Y no he venido en modo alguno para que me liberes de ella. Más bien he venido, me parece, a doblar mis patas delanteras, a la manera del camello cuando se arrodilla para acomodar el peso del lomo. Pero he supuesto que durante todo este tiempo habrás estado juzgando sobre temas especiales y privados, a propósito de los cuales no te he importunado; únicamente he querido saber primero a qué conclusión has llegado. No te pido más que esto; estoy dispuesto a aceptarla, sea cual fuere.

Chad alzó la cara al cielo con una lenta bocanada de humo.

—Ya me he dado cuenta.

Strether esperó unos momentos.

—Te he dejado totalmente solo; no creo que, desde el primer par de horas, desde que te pedí simplemente paciencia, te haya agobiado mucho.

—Oh, ha sido usted muy bondadoso.

—Los dos lo hemos sido, entonces: hemos jugado limpio. Les hemos puesto en condiciones irreprochables.

—Ah —exclamó Chad—, ¡en condiciones magníficas! Lo tenían al alcance de la mano, al alcance de la mano... —parecía conjeturar el joven, mientras seguía fumando, con los ojos fijos en las estrellas. Podría, por calmo deporte, haber leído su horóscopo en ellas. Strether se preguntaba mientras tanto qué habían tenido al alcance de la mano hasta que, por último, lo supo—. Les habría sido muy fácil dejarme solo; haber llegado a la conclusión, al verme en carne y hueso y con sus propios ojos, de que yo podía seguir tan bien como hasta ahora.

Strether asentía ante aquella afirmación con plena lucidez, sin que el plural de su compañero, relativo a la señora Newsome y su hija, tuviera ninguna ambigüedad para él. Al parecer no había nada que reprochar a Mamie y Jim; lo que vino a corroborar la sensación de nuestro amigo de que Chad sabía lo que pensaba.

—Pero han llegado a la conclusión contraria: que *no puedes* seguir como hasta ahora.

—No —continuó Chad del mismo modo—; no se saldrán con la suya en absoluto.

Strether fumaba pensativamente a su lado. Era como si el elevado lugar en que se encontraban representase una especie de atalaya moral desde la que pudiesen contemplar su reciente pasado.

—Bien sabes que nunca hubo la menor posibilidad de que se salieran con la suya.

—Desde luego que no... ninguna oportunidad real. ¡Pero si necesitaban creer que la había...!

—No necesitaban nada —había deducido ya Strether—. No vinieron por ti, sino por mí. No vinieron a ver con sus propios ojos lo que tú hacías, sino lo que hacía yo. El primer brote de curiosidad estaba destinado inevitablemente, por mi culpable retraso, a dar libre paso al segundo; y fue de este segundo arrebato, si me permites la envidiosa alusión, del que han estado exclusivamente pendientes. En otras palabras, cuando Sarah se puso en camino fue para venir por mí.

Chad se tomó aquello con lucidez y condescendencia al mismo tiempo.

—¡En bonito lío le he metido a usted, en tal caso!

Strether volvió a hacer una pequeña pausa; que terminó con una respuesta que pareció concluir de una vez por todas con este elemento de tortura. Chad lo enfocaría, en cualquier caso, cuando volvieran a verse, de esta forma.

—Ya estaba metido cuando me encontraste.

—Ah, fue usted —dijo riendo el joven— quien me encontró.

—Yo me limité a seguirte la pista. Pero tú me descubriste. En cualquier caso, era inevitable que viniesen. Y se han alegrado mucho —dijo Strether.

—Bueno, yo he contribuido un poco en ese sentido —dijo Chad.

Su compañero también fue equitativo consigo mismo.

—Yo también. Lo he intentado incluso esta misma mañana, cuando estaba con la señora Pocock. A ella le divierte, por ejemplo, casi como ninguna otra cosa, como te he dicho, no tenerme miedo; y creo que la ayudé un rato.

Chad tenía más interés en aquello.

—¿Estuvo muy grosera?

Strether se debatía.

—Bueno, ella era la persona importante... fue... clara. Fue, más aún, cristalina. Y yo no sentía ningún remordimiento. Comprendía que *tenían* que venir.

—Oh, yo quería verles; aunque sólo fuera por *eso* -el remordimiento de Chad era mínimo.

Aquello pareció ser lo único que Strether quería.

—¿No es acaso el que les hayas visto *lo* más importante, por encima de cualquier otra cosa, que ha producido su visita?

Chad parecía pensar que era muy amable que su viejo amigo lo planteara de aquella manera.

—¿No le parece a usted un poco como si le hubieran tomado el pelo? ¿Se han burlado realmente de usted, mi querido amigo?

Parecía que le estuviera preguntando si se había resfriado o torcido un pie y Strether, durante un minuto, no hizo otra cosa que seguir fumando.

—Quiero verla otra vez. Debo verla.

—Claro que debe. —Chad vaciló entonces—. ¿Se refiere usted... a mi madre?

—Oh, tu madre... eso depende.

Fue como si la señora Newsome, por la fuerza de las palabras, se hubiera perdido en la lejanía. Chad, sin embargo, a pesar de ello, se esforzó por localizar su paradero.

—¿De qué depende?

Strether, por toda respuesta, le dirigió una mirada más bien larga.

—Hablo de Sarah. Debo verla otra vez, aunque prácticamente me despidió con cajas destempladas. Pero no puedo despedirme de ella en estas circunstancias.

—¿Estuvo entonces horriblemente desagradable?

Strether exhaló una nueva bocanada de humo.

—Estuvo como tenía que estar. Lo que quiero decir es que desde el momento en que no están satisfechos sólo pueden comportarse... bueno, como admito que se comportó. Les dimos —prosiguió— su ocasión de estar satisfechos, se acercaron a ella, la miraron por todas partes y no la aprovecharon.

—¡No hay que echar margaritas a los cerdos! —sugirió Chad.

—Precisamente. Y la forma en que, esta mañana, Sarah dio a entender que no estaba satisfecha, la forma en que, por utilizar tu ejemplo, olisqueó las margaritas, no nos deja ninguna esperanza en ese sentido.

Chad hizo una pausa y entonces, como con ánimo consolador:

—Por supuesto, lo último que podía esperarse es que quedaran «satisfechos».

—Bueno, a fin de cuentas, yo no sabría decirlo —murmuró Strether—. He tenido que llegar a ese extremo. No obstante —dijo, rechazando la idea— es, sin duda, mi actuación lo que resulta absurdo.

—A decir verdad, hubo momentos —dijo Chad— en que usted me pareció generoso hasta lo increíble. Sin embargo, *si* es usted creíble —añadió—, no necesito preocuparme de más.

—Soy creíble, pero inverosímil. Soy fantástico y ridículo... Ni yo mismo me lo explico. ¿Cómo van entonces —preguntó Strether— a entenderme *ellos?* De modo que yo no discuto.

—Comprendo. Ellos —dijo Chad con notable tranquilidad— son los que discuten con *nosotros.* -Strether advirtió una vez más la tranquilidad aludida, pero su joven amigo proseguía ya—. De todos modos, tendría que sentirme muy avergonzado si no le dijera otra vez que debe usted pensarlo muy bien. Quiero decir antes de renunciar de manera irreversible... —Con lo que su insistencia, como frenada por cierta delicadeza, se extinguió.

Ah, pero Strether sí la quería.

—Dilo todo, dilo todo.

—Bueno, a su edad y con lo que, cuando todo esté dicho y hecho, mi madre puede hacer por usted y ser para usted...

Chad lo había dicho todo, movido por natural escrúpulo, pero sólo hasta aquel punto; de modo que Strether, al cabo de un momento, echó una mano.

—No tener un futuro asegurado. Lo poco que, según parece, sabré cuidar de mí mismo. La forma, la forma maravillosa en que ella cuidaría sin duda de mí. Su fortuna, su bondad y el continuo milagro de que haya estado dispuesta a ir incluso tan lejos. Desde luego, desde luego —concluyó—. Estos son los factores más destacados.

Chad, mientras tanto, había pensado en otro.

—¿No se trata, pues, de que ella le guste...?

Su amigo se volvió a él con lentitud.

—¿Te irás?

—Me iré si usted me dice ahora qué cree que debo hacerlo. Ya sabe —añadió— que estoy dispuesto desde hace seis semanas.

—¡Ah-exclamó Strether—, entonces tú no sabías que yo no lo estaba! Y estás dispuesto en este momento porque ahora lo sabes.

—Es posible —replicó Chad—; pero, de todos modos, le hablo con sinceridad. Usted habla de caigar todo sobre sus hombros, pero ¿cómo se le ocurre pensar que voy a permitirlo? —Strether le palmeó el brazo, mientras permanecían apoyados en la baranda, tranquilizadoramente: como si quisiera asegurarle que disponía de los medios necesarios; pero era este sentido de la responsabilidad y el sacrificio lo que seguía pesando sobre el joven—. Lo que literalmente significa que usted, y le pido perdón por plantearlo de esta manera, renuncia al dinero. Posiblemente a mucho dinero.

—Oh —Strether rompió a reír—, si fuera una cantidad suficiente estarías justificado por plantearlo de esta manera. Pero tengo que recordarte, a mi vez, que *tú* también renuncias al dinero; y a mucho más «posiblemente», estoy seguro de ello, del que me has augurado.

—Cierto; pero yo he obtenido cierta cantidad —replicó Chad al cabo de un momento—, mientras que usted, querido amigo, usted...

—De mí no puede decirse —continuó Strether por él— que tenga ninguna «cantidad», ni cierta ni incierta. También es cierto. Sin embargo, no me moriré de hambre.

—Oh, usted no debe morirse de hambre —exageró Chad con ánimo apacible; y así, en tan agradable situación, siguieron hablando; hubo, sin embargo, para el caso, una pausa en que él se habría dicho que el más joven meditaba la delicadeza de haber prometido al mayor alguna que otra provisión contra la posibilidad recién mencionada. Esto, sin embargo, pensó presumiblemente que era mejor no hacerlo, pues al cabo de otro instante se movían en otro sentido. Strether lo había posibilitado al volver sobre el encuentro de Chad y Sarah y al preguntar si habían llegado, en aquel acontecimiento, a algo cuya naturaleza se pareciese a una «escena». A lo que Chad replicó que, por el contrario, habían sido enormemente educados; y añadió, además, que Sally no era, en definitiva, la mujer que habría cometido el error de no serlo—. Tiene las manos muy atadas, ¿sabe usted? Desde el comienzo mismo —observó con sagacidad— le tomé la delantera.

—¿Quieres decir que te debe mucho?

—Bueno, honradamente, yo no podía, desde luego, darle menos; sólo que ella no había esperado, me parece, que yo fuera a darle tanto. Y comenzó a tomarlo antes de que se diera cuenta.

—¡Y comenzó a gustarle —dijo Strether— en cuanto comenzó a tomarlo!

—Sí, le gusta... también más de lo que ella misma creía. —Tras lo que Chad observó—: Pero yo no le

gusto. En realidad me odia.

El interés de Strether aumentó.

—Entonces, ¿por qué quiere que vuelvas?

—Porque cuando se odia, se quiere triunfar; y si ella pudiera encajonarme allí, triunfaría.

Strether volvió a comprender.

—Sí... en cierto modo. Pero sería un triunfo sin valor apenas si, una vez puestos a ello, conociendo su disgusto y tal vez consciente a tiempo de cierta dosis del tuyo, te comportaras, en el propio terreno, de manera desagradable con ella.

—Ah —dijo Chad—, puede soportarme, podría soportarme, por lo menos, en casa. Es que yo vaya allí lo que constituiría su triunfo. Me odia aquí en París.

—En otras palabras, odia...

—¡Sí, *eso!* -Chad había comprendido inmediatamente la alusión; que constituía, por parte de ambos, la mayor aproximación que habían hecho a la mención de Mme. de Vionnet. Las limitaciones del común tacto, sin embargo, no evitó que quedara en el aire que era a esta dama a quien odiaba la señora Pocock. Añadía además un nuevo detalle a su admitida asunción de la rara intimidad de la relación de Chad con ella. Nunca había corrido hasta tal punto el último velo de este fenómeno como al manifestarse confundido y subsumido por la opinión que había despertado esta mujer en Woollett—. Y le diré quién me odia también —añadió inmediatamente.

Strether supo con la misma inmediatez a quién se refería; pero con una rápida protesta.

—¡Ah, no! Mamie no..., bueno —se contuvo a tiempono odia a nadie. Mamie es encantadora.

Chad negó con la cabeza.

—Por eso mismo me preocupa. No me tiene la menor simpatía.

—¿Cuánto te preocupa? ¿Qué harías por ella?

—Bueno, simpatizaría con ella si ella simpatizara conmigo. De veras —afirmó Chad.

Esto permitió a su compañero una pausa momentánea.

—Me preguntabas hace un momento si no me «gustaba» cierta persona. Me pones en situación, por tanto, de devolverte la pregunta. ¿Te «gusta» esta determinada persona?

Chad le miró con fijeza a la luz que entraba por la ventana.

—La cuestión es que no quiero.

—¿«No quieres»? —preguntó Strether.

—No lo intento... es decir, ya lo he intentado. He hecho todo lo que he podido. No puede sorprenderle a usted-prosiguió el joven con ligereza— cuando usted mismo me puso en ello. Yo, es verdad —añadió—, me esforcé un poco; pero usted insistía. Hace seis semanas pensaba que estaba decidido.

Strether comprendió.

—Pero no lo estás.

—No lo sé... es lo que *quiero* saber —dijo Chad—. Y si hubiera deseado lo bastante, por mí mismo, volver, creo que habría sabido hacerlo.

—Es posible —juzgó Strether—. Pero lo más a que llegaste fue a desear el deseo. Y aun entonces —añadió— sólo hasta que nuestros amigos llegaran. ¿Todavía sigues queriendo desear? —Con un sonido entre doloroso y desenfadado, pero totalmente vago y equívoco, Chad ocultó la cara entre las manos durante unos instantes y se la frotó de un modo caprichoso que remitía a un evasión. Strether insistió con mayor energía—: ¿Sigues todavía?

Chad mantuvo su actitud durante un rato; pero al cabo alzó el rostro y entonces, dijo abruptamente:

—¡Jim es un cretino!

—Oh, yo no te pido que insultes, describas o te pronuncies en modo alguno acerca de tus parientes; simplemente te pregunto una vez más si estás dispuesto *ahora.* Dices que has «comprendido». ¿Has comprendido tal vez que no puedes resistirte?

Chad esbozó una extraña sonrisa: lo más aproximada a la conflictiva que había mostrado hasta el presente.

—¿No podría usted *obligarme* a no resistirme?

—De donde se desprende —prosiguió Strether con gran seriedad ahora, y como si no hubiera oído las palabras del otro—, de donde se desprende que se ha hecho más por ti, me parece, acaso como mero intento, pero efectivamente llevado a cabo, de lo que jamás he visto que un ser humano hiciera por otro.

—Oh, mucho, ciertamente —dijo Chad, rindiendo justicia a la vicisitud—. Más de lo que usted aporta.

Su amigo continuó sin prestar tampoco oídos a aquello.

—Y nuestros amigos de allá no se saldrán con la suya.

—No, sencillamente no se saldrán con la suya.

—Ellos te imponen la condición, como si dijéramos, del repudio y la ingratitud; hecho que me afecta —

continuó Strether— porque me he negado a influirte en el caso del repudio.

Chad consideró aquello.

—Si usted se ha negado, tanto más me he negado yo. Y éste es el problema. —Tras lo cual procedió a formular, con cierta brusquedad, una incisiva pregunta—. ¿Diría usted *ahora* que ella no me odia?

Strether titubeó.

—¿«Ella»?

—Sí, mi madre. Solemos achacárselo a Sarah, pero viene a ser lo mismo.

—Ah —objetó Strether—, no viene a ser lo mismo en cuanto al hecho de odiarte.

A lo que, aunque como si, durante un instante, hubiese estado en ascuas, Chad replicó:

—Bueno, si odian a mi buena amiga, viene a ser lo mismo. —Había en esto una nota auténtica que hizo que Strether la considerase suficiente, intuyendo que no necesitaba nada más. El joven había dicho, solamente con aquello, en favor de su «buena amiga» mucho más de lo que había dicho nunca de manera manifiesta; había admitido la existencia de un lazo tan estrecho entre ellos que le permitía jugar con la idea de romperlo, pero que, en determinado momento, aún podía arrastrarle como un remolino. Había proseguido mientras tanto—. Y a usted también le odian, lo que ya me parece excesivo.

—Ah —dijo Strether—, tu madre no me odia.

Chad, sin embargo, siguió aferrado a aquella idea con lealtad: con lealtad, vale decir, a Strether.

—Lo hará si no tiene usted cuidado.

—Bueno, ya tengo cuidado. A decir verdad, me ando con pies de plomo. Por eso —explicó nuestro amigo— quiero verla otra vez.

Lo que arrancó a Chad la misma pregunta.

—¿A mi madre?

—Quiero ver, por ahora, a Sarah.

—¡Ah, vamos! Sin embargo, lo que no alcanzo a comprender —añadió Chad con resignada perplejidad — es lo que va a *ganar* usted con ello.

Oh, nuestro amigo habría necesitado mucho tiempo para explicarlo.

—Eso es porque no tienes, y lo creo sinceramente, la menor imaginación. Tienes otras cualidades. Pero no ninguna imaginación, ¿no te das cuenta?, en absoluto.

—Es posible. Creo que lo comprendo. —Era una idea en que Chad tenía interés—. Pero ¿no tiene usted acaso demasiada?

—¡Oh, *acaso!* -Con lo que, al cabo de un instante, bajo la influencia de aquel reproche y como si fuera en definitiva un gesto para huir de ella, Strether se dispuso a marcharse.

Libro onceno

I

Uno de los acontecimientos de la inquieta tarde que sufrió tras el ataque de la señora Pocock fue una hora dedicada, poco antes de cenar, a María Gostrey, a la que, últimamente, a pesar de la atención que tenía que prestar a otros negocios, no había olvidado en absoluto. Y que seguía sin olvidarla se reflejaría en el hecho de que volvería a estar con ella, a la misma hora, al día siguiente: con no menos apercepción, además, de saberse escuchado con interés. Había ocurrido con bastante frecuencia, para el caso, que siempre que él daba uno de sus prolongados paseos acababa por desembocar donde ella le esperaba con tanta fidelidad. Ninguna de estas excursiones había sido, en términos generales, tan significativa como el par de incidentes —fruto del corto intervalo abierto desde la anterior visita masculina— que en aquel momento se disponían a contarle. Había visto a Chad Newsome bien entrada la noche precedente y había tenido aquella misma señora, a modo de secuela de esta conversación, una segunda entrevista con Sarah.

—Pero se van —dijo el hombre—. Por fin.

Lo que desconcertó un momento a la mujer.

—¿Todos? ¿El señor Newsome también?

—¡Ah, todavía no! Sarah, Jim y Mamie. Y Waymarsh detrás... a causa de Sarah. Es todo tan hermoso —continuó Strether—; no sabría decirlo con palabras... es siempre una alegría tras otra. Y no lo es menos —añadió— que, bueno... ¿qué cree usted? El pequeño Bilham se va también. Pero éste, por supuesto, a causa de Mamie.

La señorita Gostrey quedó sorprendida.

—¿«A causa» de ella? ¿Quiere usted decir que ya están comprometidos?

—Bueno —dijo Strether—, digamos entonces que por causa mía. Él lo hará todo por mí; igual que yo, para el caso, todo lo que pueda, por él. Y por Mamie también. Mamie haría cualquier cosa por mí.

La señorita Gostrey lanzó un sustancioso suspiro.

—¡Cómo somete usted a las personas!

—A decir verdad, por un lado, es maravilloso. Pero el hecho queda neutralizado, por el otro, cuando no las someto. Con Sarah es un fracaso desde ayer; aunque pude verla otra vez, como en seguida le contaré. Con los demás, sin embargo, todo marcha bien. Mamie, por esa bendita ley nuestra, debe tener un joven absolutamente.

—Pero ¿qué debe tener el bueno del señor Bilham? ¿Pretende usted que se casen por usted?

—Pretendo que, por la misma ley dichosa, no importe una higa que no lo hagan: al final no tendré que preocuparme.

La mujer comprendió, como de costumbre, lo que el hombre quería decir.

—¿Y el señor Jim? ¿Quién le corresponde a él?

—Oh —tuvo que admitir Strether—, eso no pude arreglarlo. Está entusiasmado con el mundo, como siempre; ese mundo que, a fin de cuentas, según dice, ya que ha tenido aventuras extraordinarias, le parece tan bueno. Por fortuna, y «más aquí», como él dice, encuentra el mundo en todas partes; y la más extraordinaria de sus aventuras —prosiguió— ha sido, desde luego, la de estos días.

La señorita Gostrey, que ya recelaba, hizo al instante la conexión precisa.

—¿Ha visto otra vez a Marie?

—Fue a tomar el té con ella, al día siguiente de la fiesta de Chad... ¿no se lo he contado ya? Por invitación expresa de la mujer: los dos solos.

—¡Igualito que *usted!* -dijo María sonriendo.

—Oh, pero él está más tranquilo con ella que yo. —Y como su amiga diese a entender que le creía, completando la información, adjuntándola a viejos recuerdos de la maravillosa dama, añadió—: Lo que me habría gustado arreglar es la marcha de Mme. de Vionnet.

—¿A Suiza, con el grupo?

—Por Jim... y por simetría. Si hubiera sido factible, además, durante una quincena, la mujer se nos habría ido. Está dispuesta —añadió para terminar la remozada imagen de la mujer— a todo.

La señorita Gostrey se hizo eco de la imagen durante un instante:

—¡Es demasiado perfecta!

—Irá, me parece —continuó el hombre—, a la estación esta noche.

—¿Para despedirle?

—Con Chad, maravillosamente, como un capítulo más de sus recíprocas atenciones generales. Y con una gracia —la tenía ante sí—, una levísima gracia, un donaire y una alegría que bien pueden confundir al señor Pocock.

Estaba tan absorto ante la imagen que su compañera deslizó, al cabo de un momento, un cordial comentario.

—Como, en suma, le confundió a *usted.* ¿Está usted realmente enamorado de ella? —lanzó María.

—Lo sepa o no, tiene poca importancia —replicó el hombre—; importa tan poco... prácticamente no tiene nada que ver con ninguno de nosotros.

—De cualquier modo —continuó María con una sonrisa—, ellos, los cinco, si no le he entendido mal, se marchan mientras que usted y Mme. de Vionnet se quedan.

—Oh, y Chad. —A lo que añadió Strether—: Y usted.

—¡Ah, «yo»! —con lo que emitió una leve queja de impaciencia, en que pareció irrumpir de repente un algo de insatisfacción—. No me quedo, me parece a mí, porque ello me beneficie mucho. En presencia de todos ustedes se me ocurre pensar que me privo de algo.

Strether vaciló.

—Pero esa privación, esa marginación suya de todo, ha sido, ¿no?, una elección voluntaria.

—Oh, sí; ha sido necesario... es decir, ha sido mejor para usted. Lo que quiero decir es que parece que he dejado de serle útil a usted.

—¿Cómo puede decir eso? —preguntó el hombre—. No sabe usted hasta qué punto me ayuda. Cuando deje de...

—¿Sí? —dijo ella cuando él se interrumpió.

—Bueno, se lo haré saber. Esté tranquila mientras tanto.

La mujer meditó un momento.

—¿Entonces quiere usted, decididamente, que me quede?

—¿No me comporto con usted como si fuera así?

—Es usted muy amable conmigo. Pero no soy libre —dijo María—. El tiempo no se detiene y París se vuelve más bien caluroso y polvoriento. Los amigos se dispersan y algunos, en otros lugares, me necesitan. ¡Pero si usted quiere que me quede...!

Había hablado como si dependiera de la decisión masculina, pero el hombre había sentido repentinamente la necesidad de no perderla con una intensidad que no había sospechado.

—Quiero que se quede.

La mujer tomó la petición como si las palabras del hombre fueran lo único que deseaba; como si le aportaran, le dieran algo que fuera la compensación de su circunstancia.

—Gracias —se limitó a responder. Y luego, como él la mirase con cierta fijeza—. Muchas gracias —repitió.

Vino a ser aquello como una breve parada en el itinerario de la conversación y el hombre no pudo por menos de prolongarla.

—¿Por qué se marchó usted tan de repente hace dos meses o cuando fuera? El motivo que usted me dio por aquella ausencia de tres semanas no fue, en su momento, el verdadero.

La mujer recordó.

—Jamás supuse que se lo creyera. Sin embargo —continuó—, si no lo adivinó entonces, de algo le sirvió.

El hombre desvió la mirada al oír aquello; y se sumió, dentro de lo que cabe, en una de sus flemáticas abstracciones.

—He pensado a menudo en ello, pero nunca se me ocurrió que pudiera adivinarlo. Y ya ve usted la consideración con que la he tratado no preguntándoselo hasta ahora.

—¿Y por qué lo pregunta ahora?

—Para darle a entender cuánto la hecho de menos cuando no está aquí y lo que para mí significa.

—¡No parece haber significado —dijo ella riendo— todo lo que pudo significar! Sin embargo —añadió —, si de veras no adivinó la verdad, entonces se la diré.

—De veras no la adiviné —confesó Strether.

—¿Nunca?

—Nunca.

—Bueno, en tal caso... me fui para no sufrir la turbación de estar presente si Marie de Vionnet le decía a usted algo en perjuicio mío.

El hombre pareció, sin embargo, como si dudase todavía.

—Pero habría tenido que afrontarlo de todos modos cuando volvió.

—Oh, si hubiera tenido algún indicio de que se había dicho algo inconveniente, me habría despedido de usted para siempre.

—¿Luego —continuó el hombre— se aventuró usted a volver basándose solamente en la suposición de que ella había sido clemente?

María resumió lo que pensaba.

—Le estoy muy agradecida. Fuera cual fuese su incentivo, no nos separó. Este es uno de los motivos —prosiguió— por los que la admiro tanto.

—Digamos que es también —dijo Strether— uno de los míos. Pero ¿cuál habría sido su incentivo?

—¿Cuál es siempre el incentivo de las mujeres?

El hombre meditó... aunque no mucho, naturalmente.

—¿Los hombres?

—Lo habría tenido a usted, con aquello, más a su disposición. Pero comprendió que no le hacía falta.

—¡Oh, «tenerme a su disposición»! —exclamó Strether con un suspiro ligeramente ambiguo—. *Usted* me habría tenido a su disposición, en cualquier caso, *a pesar de aquello.*

—¡Oh, «tenerle a mi disposición»! —remedó ella—. Le tendré, sin embargo —dijo con menos ironía— en cuanto exprese usted un deseo.

El hombre se detuvo ante ella, totalmente predispuesto.

—Expresaré cincuenta.

Lo que, a decir verdad, provocó en la mujer, con cierta inconsecuencia, el regreso de la leve queja.

—¡Ah, cómo es usted!

Del mismo modo seguiría siendo el hombre durante el resto del tiempo y como si quisiera darle a entender que ella aún podía ayudarle, al volver al tema de la partida de los Pocock, le dio una imagen vívida y con mil detalles más de los que se podrían reproducir aquí de lo que le había acontecido aquella mañana. Había estado diez minutos con Sarah en el hotel de ésta, diez minutos rescatados, por causas de fuerza mayor, al tiempo, sobre el que ya había dicho a la señorita Gostrey que había pasado, al final de la entrevista aludida y en la morada del hombre, la gran esponja del futuro. Se había presentado en el

domicilio femenino sin anunciarse y la había encontrado en la sala de estar con una costurera y una *lingère,* cuyas facturas parecía ya haber liquidado con mayor o menor ingenio, y que no tardaron en retirarse. Le había explicado entonces el hombre que había cumplido, bien entrada la noche pasada, su promesa de ver a Chad.

—Y le dije que me responsabilizaría de todo.

—¿Que usted se «responsabilizaría» de todo?

—Bueno, si no se va. María esperó.

—¿Y quién se responsabiliza si se va? —preguntó la mujer con alegría un tanto ensombrecida.

—Bueno —dijo Strether—, sea como fuere, pienso responsabilizarme de todo.

—Por lo que intuyo se refiere usted —dijo su compañera al cabo de un momento— a que ha terminado por comprender que lo pierde todo.

El hombre volvió a detenerse ante ella.

—Viene a ser lo mismo. Pero el caso es que Chad, ahora que ha entendido, no quiere.

La mujer podía creerlo, pero pidió, como siempre, mayor claridad.

—Pero ¿qué ha entendido, en definitiva?

—Lo que ellos quieren de él. Y eso basta.

—¿Contrasta tan desfavorablemente con lo que quiere Mme. de Vionnet?

—Contrasta... a secas. Total y absolutamente.

—¿Por tanto, quizá, más que nada con lo que *usted* quiere?

—Oh, —dijo Strether—, lo que yo quiero es algo que he dejado de calibrar y hasta comprender.

Pero su amiga no iba a detenerse.

—¿Quiere a la señora Newsome... después de la forma en que le ha tratado?

Era una forma muy directa de tratar de esta dama que los dos —tal era su elevada posición— se permitían; pero no se correspondió del todo con esto que el hombre se retrasase un poco.

—Es posible que, a fin de cuentas, haya sido la única forma que se le ha ocurrido.

—¿Y eso estimula su deseo?

—La he desilusionado hasta lo indecible —pensó Strether que valía la pena decir.

—Y tanto que sí. Eso salta a la vista; hace tiempo que lo tenemos claro. Pero ¿no está casi tan claro — prosiguió María— que todavía tiene usted la auténtica solución a mano? Lléveselo a rastras de una vez, como creo que puede usted aún, y dejará de preocuparse por su desilusión.

—Ah, en tal caso —dijo el hombre riendo—, tendría que preocuparme por la de usted.

Aquello sorprendió a la mujer.

—Pero ¿por qué esa preocupación? Que yo sepa, no ha tomado usted una decisión para complacerme a mí.

—Oh —insistió el hombre—, también eso ha tenido su influencia. No puedo separar los factores: sólo existen en conjunto; y eso es, quizá, me atrevería a decir, lo que no me explico. —Pero el hombre estaba dispuesto a afirmar otra vez que esto no importaba en absoluto; tanto más cuanto que, como él decía, aún *no* se había «pronunciado»—. Ella me concede, a fin de cuentas, hablando en plata, un último gesto de piedad, otra oportunidad. No embarcarán hasta que pasen cinco o seis semanas y no esperaban, ella lo admite, que Chad tomara parte en su excursión. Todavía puede reunirse con ellos, en última instancia, en Liverpool.

La señorita Gostrey meditó.

—¿Cómo va a «poder» si no lo empuja usted? ¿Cómo va Chad a reunirse con ellos en Liverpool si no hace más que afianzar su situación aquí?

—Ha dado a su hermana, según le dije que me había comunicado ella ayer, su palabra de honor de que haría lo que yo dijese.

Maria se quedó de una pieza.

—¡Pero si usted no dice nada!

Bueno, el hombre, al oír aquello, se puso a pasear.

—Dije algo esta mañana. Respondí a Sarah: le di la respuesta que le había prometido después de saber de Chad lo que estaba dispuesto a prometer. Lo que ella me pidió ayer, usted lo recordará, sin duda, fue el compromiso de que obligaría a Chad a cumplir su promesa.

—Bueno, entonces —preguntó la señorita Gostrey—, ¿el objeto de la visita a Sarah fue la negativa?

—No; fue pedirle, por extraño que le parezca, otra prórroga.

—Ah, eso es debilidad.

—¡Exactamente! —La mujer había hablado con impaciencia, pero cuando menos sabía el hombre cuál era su posición—. Si soy débil, quiero averiguarlo. Si no lo averiguo, tendré el consuelo, la pequeña gloria, de creerme fuerte.

—¡Tendrá usted, me parece a mí —replicó la mujer—, todo el consuelo del mundo!

—En cualquier caso —dijo el hombre—, llevará otro mes. Paris puede volverse, de un día para otro, más caluroso y polvoriento, como usted dice; pero hay otras cosas más candentes y polvorientas. No me asusta quedarme; el verano tiene que ser divertido aquí, a su salvaje o civilizada manera; el paisaje no puede ser más pintoresco. Creo que me gustará. Y además —dijo dedicando a la mujer una benévola sonrisaademás, estará usted.

—Oh —protestó ella—, no será para formar parte de lo pintoresco por lo que me quedaré, pues seré con usted la más normal de las mujeres. No puede usted, y lo sabe, en cualquier caso —prosiguió—, recurrir a ninguna otra. Es posible que Mme. de Vionnet tenga pensado irse, ¿no?, y también el señor Newsome, por lo mismo; a menos que se asegure usted de lo contrario. De modo que si piensa usted quedarse con ellos —era su deber sugerirlo— puede salirle el tiro por la culata. Naturalmente, si se quedan —admitió—, formarán parte de lo pintoresco. Además, usted podría reunirse con ellos en alguna parte.

Strether pareció encarar aquello como si se tratase de una ocurrencia afortunada; pero un instante después hablaba con mayor sentido crítico.

—¿Dice usted que probablemente se irán juntos?

La mujer no lo pensó mucho.

—Creo que sería tratarle a usted sin demasiada ceremonia si lo hicieran. Aunque, al fin y al cabo —añadió—, sería difícil precisar en este momento cuánta ceremonia precisa su caso de usted.

—Desde luego —concedió Strether—, mi disposición hacia ellos es extraordinaria.

—Precisamente; tanto que es dificil ver qué tono de conducta, de su parte, se le puede equiparar. Una disposición que no palidezca ante la suya es lo que tienen que tener. Lo realmente hermoso quizá —dijo entonces— sería que se retirasen a posiciones más discretas y al mismo tiempo le ofrecieran a usted compartirlas con ellos. —El hombre la miró, en esto, como si hubiera intuido ella alguna nueva generosa irritación en el hombre; y lo que dijo a continuación lo explicaba a medias—: No tema decirme si lo que le retiene ahora es la agradable perspectiva de la ciudad vacía, con sus bancos a la sombra, sus refrescos, los museos abandonados, los paseos nocturnos hasta el Bois y nuestra maravillosa mujer para usted solo. —Y aún dijo más—: Lo mejor, si bien se mira, sería, tal vez, que el señor Chad se fuera solo durante un tiempo. Es una lástima, desde este punto de vista —concluyó—, que no haga una visita a su madre. Por lo menos llenaría el intervalo de usted. —Un pensamiento que la entretuvo un instante—. *¿Por qué* no visita a su madre? Con una semana, en momento tan oportuno, bastaría.

—Mi querida señora —replicó Strether, y hasta él mismo se sorprendió de estar tan preparado—, mi querida señora, su madre *ya* le ha visitado a él. La señora Newsome ha estado con él, durante este mes, con una asiduidad que estoy seguro no ha podido él por menos de sentir; la ha tratado profusamente y ha condescendido en darle las gracias. ¿Sugiere usted que vaya en busca de más agradecimiento?

Bueno, la mujer tuvo que rechazar la idea al cabo de un momento.

—Comprendo. Es lo que usted no sugeriría... lo que no ha sugerido. Y no se le escapa.

—Usted tampoco, estimada amiga —dijo el hombre con amabilidad—, si la hubiera visto.

—¿A la señora Newsome?

—A Sarah... lo cual, tanto a Chad como a mí, nos ha sido muy útil.

—Y útil de un modo —murmuró la mujer a modo de respuesta— francamente extraordinario.

—Bueno —explicó el hombre parcialmente—, lo que ocurre es que es una mujer muy calculadora; de modo que Sarah nos lo ha servido en bandeja sin desperdiciar una gota. Gracias a ella hemos sabido lo que la señora Newsome piensa de nosotros.

María había seguido el hilo, pero tenía una observación que hacer.

—Lo que no he podido averiguar hasta ahora, permítamelo, es lo que piensa usted, quiero decir personalmente, de *ella.* ¿No está un poco, por decirlo todo, preocupado?

—Eso —respondió el hombre sin tardanza— es lo que el propio Chad me preguntó anoche. Me preguntó si no me importaba la pérdida... bueno, la pérdida de un opulento futuro. Cosa que, por otro lado —se apresuró a añadir—, era una pregunta del todo natural.

—Quisiera hacerle ver, de todos modos —dijo la señorita Gostrey—, que no es eso lo que yo le pregunto. Lo que me atrevo a preguntarle es si es la pérdida de la señora Newsome lo que le resulta indiferente.

—No creo haberme mostrado indiferente —dijo él con gran seguridad—. Todo lo contrario. Desde el primer momento me ha preocupado la impresión que todo podía causarle, que no se sintiera oprimida, acosada, atormentada. No me interesaba más que pudiera comprender —lo que yo comprendía. Y me he sentido tan desconcertado, tan descorazonado y tan desilusionado por su negativa a comprender como parece que se ha sentido ella por lo que ha considerado la perversidad de mi insistencia.

—¿Quiere usted decir que ella le ha turbado tanto como usted a ella?

Strether vaciló.

—Yo, sin duda, no soy tan sensible. Pero, por otro lado, he hecho mucho por ajustarme a ella. Ella, en cambio, no ha cedido ni un ápice.

—¿De modo que está usted al fin —insinuó María la moraleja— en la triste etapa de los reproches?

—No, lo que le cuento no lo sabe nadie más. He sido como un cordero para Sarah. Me he limitado a retroceder. Y cuando uno ha sido empujado de manera tan indignante acaba temiéndolo.

La mujer le observó durante un momento.

—¿La ruptura?

—Bueno, tengo la sensación de haber caído tan bruscamente no sé dónde, que pienso que han tenido que despedirme.

La mujer retrocedió a un detalle anterior, aunque esperando más aclarar que concordar.

—El caso es que yo creo que usted se decepcionó...

—¿Desde que llegué? Es posible. Admito que me quedé muy sorprendido.

—Ah, entonces —prosiguió María—, yo tuve que ver mucho con ello.

—¿Con mi situación de sorpresa?

—Por ejemplo —dijo ella riendo—, ya que es demasiado delicado para llamarle *mi* situación. Por supuesto —añadió—, usted vino más o menos en busca de sorpresas.

—¡Por supuesto! —justipreció el hombre.

—Pero todas han sido para usted —continuó ella analizando— y ninguna para *ella.*

Una vez más se detuvo ante la mujer como si ésta hubiera puesto el dedo en la llaga.

—Ese es su punto difícil: que ella no admite las sorpresas. Es un rasgo, me parece, que la describe y da cuenta de ella; y casa con lo que ya le he dicho: que es una mujer muy calculadora. Lo había maquinado todo por anticipado y tenía que dar conmigo los mismos resultados que con ella. Siempre que planea algo no deja lugar para otra cosa; como si dijéramos, ningún margen de error. Lo calcula todo con tanta minuciosidad, lo cocina con tal precisión que si uno quiere añadir o quitar algún condimento...

—¿Se ve obligado a enfrentarse abiertamente con ella?

—Lo que pasa —dijo Strether— es que uno se ve obligado, moral e intelectualmente, a desembarazarse de ella. —Lo que parece —replicó María— que prácticamente ha hecho usted.

Su amigo echó la cabeza hacia atrás.

—No la he conmovido. Nadie podría conmoverla. Lo comprendo ahora con mayor claridad que nunca; y ella se mantiene con tal perfección propia —prosiguió— que cualquier cambio en su composición parecería un error. En cualquier caso, fue a la misma mujer, el macizo conjunto moral e intelectual, lo que Sarah me planteó que tomara o dejara.

Lo que despertó en María Gostrey un pensamiento más profundo.

—Pues hace falta imaginación para afrontar a un macizo conjunto moral e intelectual.

—Era eso, ni más ni menos-dijo Strether—, lo que había hecho en casa. Pero, sin saber por qué, allí no me daba cuenta cabal.

—Supongo que es difícil —convino la señorita Gostreycalcular por anticipado, en un caso así, el tamaño, como usted dice, del macizo conjunto. Va despuntando poco a poco. Y ha ido surgiendo ante usted hasta que al final ha terminado por verlo en su totalidad.

—Lo veo totalmente —repitió el hombre abstraído, mientras que sus ojos habrían podido estar clavados en un iceberg más bien grande en un mar septentrional, frío y azul—. ¡Es magnífico! —exclamó entonces con cierta rareza.

Pero su amiga, que estaba acostumbrada a este tipo de inconsecuencias, no perdió prenda.

—No perdió nada tan magnífico, a pesar de lo que le hagan creer los demás, que no pueda imaginarse. Aquello le hizo volver en sí.

—¡Ah, ya salió usted! Es lo que le dije a Chad anoche mismo. Es decir, que él no tenía imaginación.

—Se dijera-sugirió María— que por lo menos tiene algo en común con su madre.

—Tiene en común que permite que uno se intuya a sí mismo. Sin embargo —añadió, como si el tema fuera de interés—, se intuye también a los demás, aunque tengan mucha.

María Gostrey continuaba con sus sugerencias.

—¿Mme. de Vionnet?

—Sí, tiene mucha.

—Cierto... antaño tenía en abundancia. Pero hay otras formas de conocerse.

—Sí, parece que sí. ¡Usted, por ejemplo...!

El hombre iba a continuar con benevolencia, pero ella no iba a permitírselo.

—Oh, yo no me conozco en ese sentido; mi imaginación es tan pequeña que no vale la pena reparar en ella. La de usted —continuó—, ésa sí que es monstruosa. Tiene usted más que nadie.

Aquello le chocó un poco.

—Es lo que Chad dice también.

—Ahora es la suya... aunque él no tiene por qué quejarse.

—Oh, pero si él no se queja —dijo Strether.

—¡Es lo que faltaba! Pero ¿respecto de qué —prosiguió María— surgió el tema?

—Bueno, él me preguntó qué ganaba yo. La mujer hizo una pausa.

—Como yo se lo he preguntado también, eso resuelve *mi* caso. ¡Oh, tiene usted-repitió-auténticas montañas!

Pero el hombre había pensado durante un segundo en otra cosa y planteó otra cuestión.

—Sin embargo, la señora Newsome, merece recordarse, ha imaginado, esto es, imaginaba, y al parecer lo sigue haciendo, barbaridades a propósito de lo que yo habría encontrado. Constaba ya, en su perspectiva, impresionante, a pesar de todo, que yo las encontrase; y eso que yo no encajaba, que no podía encajar, que no acabaría encajando, como al final advirtió ella, en sus presupuestos. Era más de lo que podía soportar. De ahí su decepción.

—¿Quiere decir que usted tenía que encontrar a Chad insufrible?

—Yo tenía que encontrar a la mujer.

—¿Insufrible?

—Tenía que encontrarla como ella la imaginaba. —Con lo que Strether hizo una pausa, como si no pudiera añadir ningún retoque a la imagen.

Su compañera había reflexionado mientras tanto.

—Pues imaginaba como una estúpida, de modo que estamos en las mismas.

—¿Como una estúpida? ¡Oh! —exclamó Strether. Pero la mujer insistió.

—Pensaba con bajeza.

El hombre, sin embargo, tenía un término más preciso.

—Ante todo con ignorancia.

—Bueno, exageración más ignorancia: ¿puede haber algo peor?

La pregunta podía haber hecho recapacitar el hombre, pero la dejó pasar.

—Sarah no vive en la ignorancia... ahora; pero mantiene la teoría de lo insufrible.

—Ah, pero es exagerada, y esto, a veces, tiene sus ventajas. Si no sirve, en el presente caso, para negar que Marie es encantadora, sirve por lo menos para negar que es buena.

—Lo que yo afirmo es que es buena para Chad.

—Usted *no* afirma —pareció poner en claro la mujer— el que sea buena para *usted.*

Pero el hombre continuó sin hacerle caso:

—Esa es la conclusión a la que quería que llegaran: que vieran con sus propios ojos si ella no le conviene.

—Y ahora que lo han hecho, ¿no admitirán que es buena para lo que sea?

—Piensan —admitió Strether entonces— que es, en términos generales, aproximadamente tan mala para mí. Pero son lógicos, desde luego, en la medida en que tienen claro lo que nos conviene.

—A usted, para empezar —dijo María, toda solicitud, confinada al tema por el momento—, borrar de su existencia, y de ser posible incluso de su memoria, el espantoso parásito que yo debo de simbolizar para ellos, más si cabe que borrar el mal manifiesto, y por tanto un poco menos agorero, de la persona de quien usted ha dado en ser cómplice. Sin embargo, esto es relativamente sencillo. Puede usted, en el peor de los casos, en última instancia, renunciar a la criatura que soy.

—Puedo, en el peor de los casos, en última instancia, renunciar a la criatura que es usted. —La ironía era tan obvia que no hacía falta preocuparse—. Puedo, en el peor de los casos, en última instancia, incluso olvidar a la criatura.

—Digamos que es práctico. Pero el señor Newsome tiene mucho más que olvidar. ¿Cómo puede hacerlo *él?*

—¡Ah, ahora somos los dos! Es precisamente lo que yo tenía que haberle obligado a hacer; mi labor era ayudarle y colaborar con él.

La mujer meditó en silencio y sin ambages, como si estuviera, quizá, muy familiarizada con los hechos; y la meditación llevó a cabo un entronque que no reveló los engarces.

—¿Recuerda usted que solíamos hablar en Chester y en Londres de mi ayuda a usted? —Hablaba como de cosas lejanas y como si hubieran pasado semanas en los lugares mencionados.

—Precisamente es lo que está haciendo.

—Ah, pero lo peor, puesto que ha dejado usted tal margen, puede acontecer todavía. Usted puede fracasar aún.

—Sí, todavía puedo fracasar. Pero ¿me aceptaría usted...?

El hombre había titubeado y ella esperaba.

—¿Aceptarle?

—Hasta que pueda soportarlo.

La mujer también se debatía.

—El señor Newsome y Mme. de Vionnet, al fin y al cabo, pueden, como decimos, salir de la ciudad. ¿Cuánto cree usted que lo soportaría sin ellos?

La respuesta de Strether fue a primera vista otra pregunta.

—¿Salir de la ciudad, dice usted, para alejarse de mí?

La réplica femenina no careció de brusquedad.

—Disculpe mi rudeza, pero he de decirle que tiendo a pensar que querrían hacerlo.

El hombre la miró con fijeza otra vez, dando la sensación por un instante de una concentración mental a cuya instancia se mudó el color de aquél. Pero sonrió.

—¿Quiere usted decir después de lo que me han hecho?

—Después de lo que le ha hecho Marie.

Ante aquello, sin embargo, con una carcajada, el hombre se recuperó.

—Ah, pero no lo ha hecho todavía.

II

Había tomado el tren, días después, en una estación —rumbo también *a* una estación— elegida casi al azar; los días, a despecho de lo que ocurriera, eran incontables y se había dejado llevar del impulso —instintivo, sin duda— de dedicar uno entero a aquel ruralismo francés, con su fresco verdor particular, que sólo había contemplado hasta el momento por la pequeña y oblonga ventana del marco pictórico. No había sido, sin embargo, en su mayor parte, sino una tierra de fantasía para él: el telón de fondo de la ficción, el pretexto del arte, el plantel de las letras; prácticamente tan lejana como Grecia, pero prácticamente también, tan consagrada. Un relato maravilloso, en él sentir de Strether, se fraguaba en aquellos apacibles elementos; e incluso después de haberse, pues así se sentía, «empapado», llegaba a sentirse intrigado un poco ante la posibilidad de ver algo en alguna parte que le recordase cierto pequeño Lambinet que le había encantado, años atrás, en el establecimiento de un anticuario de Boston y que, de manera más bien absurda, nunca había olvidado. Se le había ofrecido, recordaba, a un precio que se le había dicho era el más bajo que se había pedido por un Lambinet, un precio que nunca le había hecho sentirse tan pobre por tener que admitir, al mismo tiempo, que estaba más allá de cualquier posibilidad imaginada. Las había imaginado: había dado vueltas y más vueltas a las posibilidades durante una hora: había sido la única aventura de su vida en relación con la compra de una obra de arte. La aventura, se observará, era modesta; pero el recuerdo, por encima de toda razón y en virtud de una asociación de ideas accidental, era dulce. El pequeño Lambinet había de seguirle como la adquisición material con que, en toda su vida, había fracasado de la manera más estrepitosa: la producción particular que le había hecho por entonces sobrepasar la modestia de la naturaleza. Sabía muy bien que si lo veía de nuevo acaso sufriera un desvanecimiento o una conmoción y jamás se había encontrado en la circunstancia de desear que la rueda del tiempo volviese a presentárselo, tal y como lo había visto en el santuario interino, de colores pardos e iluminado desde el techo, de Tremont Street. Bien diferente sería, sin embargo, ver la recordada mezcolanza disuelta en sus elementos, presenciar la restauración de la naturaleza de todo el lejano momento: el día polvoriento de Boston, el telón de fondo del Fitchburg Depôt, del sagrario de color pardo, la imagen de un verde especial, el precio ridículo, los chopos, los sauces, el viento, el río, el cielo plateado e inundado de sol, el horizonte ensombrecido por los bosques.

No prestaba más atención al tren que la circunstancia de que se detendría unas cuantas veces antes de salir de la *banlieu;* confiaba en que la bonanza general del día le indicaría donde apearse. Su teoría de la presente excursión era que se bajaría en cualquier parte —aunque a más de una hora de Paris— en que captase un indicio de la nota particular que necesitaba. Despuntó, el indicio —el clima, el aire, la luz, el color y su humor, pues todo contribuía— al cabo de una hora y veinte minutos; el tren se detuvo en el lugar preciso y se descubrió descendiendo con tanta seguridad como quien acude a una cita. Será sensato pensar que podía entretenerse, a su edad, con minucias si recuerda que su cita era sólo con un marchito entusiasmo bostoniano. No se había alejado sin la instantánea confianza de que la cita se daría con rigor suficiente. El marco oblongo y dorado exhibía sus rayas envolventes; los chopos y los sauces, los juncos y el río —un río del que no sabía, ni quería saber, el nombre— armonizaban felizmente con ellas; el cielo era de plata, de turquesa, de esmalte; la aldea de la izquierda era blanca y la iglesia de la derecha era gris; allí estaba todo, en suma, todo lo que quería: era Tremont Street, era Francia, era Lambinet. Además, paseaba

con libertad absoluta. Hizo esto último, durante una hora, para regocijo de su corazón, buscando el horizonte sombreado de bosques y engolfándose de tal modo en sus impresiones y su ocio que las habría traspasado para tocar la pared de color pardo. Era asombroso, sin duda, que el sabor del ocio no necesitase más tiempo para endulzarse; pero había contado con unos cuantos días por delante; se había endulzado, a decir verdad, desde la partida de los Pocock. Paseaba y paseaba como para decirse que tenía muy poco que hacer; no tenía otra cosa que hacer que dirigirse a la falda de un cerro cualquiera donde echarse en el suelo y oír el rumor de los chopos, con lo que —en el curso de una tarde empleada de aquel modo, una tarde ricamente provista además con la sensación del libro en el bolsillo— habría ordenado suficientemente la escena para merecer la pequeña posada rústica en que haría una tentativa tocante a la cena. Había un tren de vuelta a las 9,20 y se vio a sí mismo comiendo, al filo del día, con los complementos de un basto mantel blanco y un suelo de tierra, algo frito y ciertamente sabroso, regado con un buen vino; tras lo que podía, si gustaba, volver paseando a la estación u optar por la *carriole* local y charlar con el conductor, un conductor a quien, naturalmente, no faltarían un blusón limpio y almidonado, un gorro de punto e ingenio en las respuestas: que, en definitiva, se sentaría en la vara, le contaría lo que pensaban los franceses y le recordaría, como, a decir verdad, todo el episodio, a Maupassant. Strether oía sus labios, por vez primera con acento francés, mientras la fantasía adquiría consistencia, emitir sonidos de intención manifiesta sin ningún temor de la compañía. Él había tenido miedo de Chad, de María y de Mme. de Vionnet; había tenido más miedo que a nadie a Waymarsh, en cuya presencia, mientras se mezclaban con la luz de la ciudad, nunca había lucido, sin pagar algún precio por ello, su vocabulario o su acento. Por lo general, el precio que pagaba era, inmediatamente después, un cruce de miradas con el amigo.

Tales fueron las libertades con que jugó su fantasía una vez que se hubo dirigido a la falda del cerro que, indiscutiblemente, así como de la forma más cariñosa, le esperaba a la sombra de los chopos, la falda que le hizo sentir, durante un murmurante par de horas, lo feliz de su idea. Le dominaba la sensación del triunfo, de una armonía más sutil en las cosas; nada distinto de lo que había esperado. Se le ocurrió pensar entonces con gran intensidad, mientras permanecía echado de espaldas en la hierba, que Sarah se había ido, que su tensión había terminado; la paz que entrañaban estas ideas podía ser ilusoria, pero le acunaba, en cualquier caso, por el momento. Le adormeció durante media hora satisfactoriamente; se puso el sombrero de paja sobre los ojos —lo había comprado la víspera como un recuerdo del de Waymarsh— y volvió a sumirse en Lambinet. Era como si hubiera descubierto que estaba cansado: no cansado del paseo, sino de aquel ejercicio interior que había conocido, en conjunto, durante tres meses, tan pocas interrupciones. De esto se trataba: una vez que hubieron partido había creído derrumbarse; allí, además, era adonde había ido a caer y en aquel momento tocaba fondo. Estaba golosamente tranquilo, sosegado y alegre gracias a lo que había encontrado al final de su descenso. Era en gran medida aquello por lo que había dicho a María Gostrey que le gustaría quedarse, el diseminado París estival, a la vez oscuro y enceguecedor, con la masa de sus columnas y comisas alzada para él, con la sombra y el aire en el revoloteo de los toldos anchos como avenidas. Recordaba sin paliativos que, al buscar, un día después de hacer la observación, alguna prueba de su libertad, había ido aquella misma tarde a ver a Mme. de Vionnet. Había vuelto dos días después y el efecto de las dos visitas, el dejo de las dos horas pasadas con ella, era casi el de la plenitud y la repetición. La valiente intención de la frecuencia, más loable desde el momento en que tan injustamente se sospechaba de él en Woollett, había quedado más bien en el plano teórico y una de las cosas que podía meditar bajo los chopos era el origen de la timidez particular que todavía acicateaba su prudencia. Se había desembarazado ya de ella, sin duda, de esta timidez particular; ¿qué le había ocurrido, antes de concluir la semana, sino que había desaparecido a fuerza de insistencia?

Sabía con toda claridad que había sido cauto por un motivo. Había temido, a decir verdad, en su conducta, un bache en su buena fe; si había un peligro en apreciar en demasía a una mujer de tal enjundia, la mayor seguridad propia consistía en esperar al menos a tener el derecho a tal aprecio. A la luz de los últimos días, el peligro era ciertamente intenso; tanto que era relativamente aforunado que el derecho aludido se hubiera otorgado. Parecía a nuestro amigo que en ambas ocasiones se había beneficiado al máximo de éste; ¿de qué mejor modo habría podido hacerlo, se preguntaba en última instancia, que haciéndole saber a ella inmediatamente que, si no le molestaba, él prefería no hablar de nada molesto? Jamás había visto una brazada de elevados intereses tan sacrificada como en esta observación; jamás había preparado tanto el camino de la frivolidad relativa como al dirigirla a la inteligencia de Mme. de Vionnet. No había comprendido sino pasado un tiempo que al conjurarlo todo salvo lo placentero había conjurado casi todo lo que hasta el momento había hablado al respecto; y no sería sino después cuando recordaría que, con aquel tono remozado, ni siquiera habían mencionado el nombre de Chad. Una de las cosas que más retenía en aquella falda montañesa era la deliciosa placidez con que había alcanzado el nuevo tono con aquella mujer. Pensaba, echado de espaldas, en todos los tonos que la mujer habría posibilitado de tener que probarla y, en cualquier caso, en la probabilidad de que se pudiera confiar en ella la adaptación de los

mismos a las circunstancias. Había deseado que comprendiera ella la necesidad de que, pues él era ya hombre desinteresado, ella lo fuera también; la mujer había dado a entender que lo comprendía y él, asimismo, que le estaba agradecido, y había sido, de manera extraordinaria, como si él la visitara por vez primera. Habían tenido otros encuentros, aunque irrelevantes; era casi como si, de haber conocido antes los dos cuánto tenían *realmente* en común, hubiera unos cuantos asuntos relativamente insignificantes que habrían podido soslayar. Bueno, pues ya los soslayaban, incluso con graciosa gratitud, incluso con magníficos «¡No me diga!», y era sorprendente lo que aún podía surgir con remitirse a lo que no había dejado de darse entre ellos. Acaso no había sido, en última instancia, mas que[15] cuestiones tales como la diferencia entre Victor Hugo y los poetas ingleses; Victor Hugo, para quien no podía tenerse a mano sino comparaciones múltiples, y los poetas ingleses, a los que el amigo de la dama, de manera bastante sorprendente, con pintoresco arcaísmo conocía. Sin embargo**, había contribuido igualmente al objeto de su aparición que le hubiera dicho:

—No lo acepto, si es que esto sirve de algo, porque yo haya «hecho», como ellos dicen, por usted, no sé qué evidente torpeza; lo acepto... bueno, lo acepto, diantre, por cualquier otra cosa que usted prefiera. De modo que, por la misma conveniencia, no sea conmigo simplemente la persona que he llegado a conocer en virtud de mi incómoda vinculación con Chad... pues ¿hubo algo alguna vez, por cierto, *más* incómodo? Sea para mí, por favor, con todo su admirable tacto y su no menos admirable confianza, de tal modo que yo pueda demostrarle que es un placer pensar en usted.

Había sido una indicación demasiado prolija para ser correspondida; pero si ella no la había correspondido, ¿qué había hecho entonces, y cómo había podido discurrir el tiempo compartido con tanta dulzura, con tranquilidad pero sin lentitud, derritiéndose, deshaciéndose en la feliz ilusión masculina de ocio? No podía sino reconocer, por otro lado, que no había carecido de razones, en su anterior situación reprimida, para vigilar la posibilidad de los baches en la buena fe.

Siguió fomentando la imagen —que representaba según él su situación— durante el resto de aquel día andariego; tanto que su influjo seguía aún, más que nunca si cabe, dominándole, cuando, a eso de las seis, se sorprendió charlando amistosamente con una mujer recia, de voz profunda y con un gorro blanco, en la puerta del *auberge* del más grande de los pueblos, un pueblo que se le antojaba una combinación de lo blanco, lo azul, lo tortuoso y el verdor manchado, y cuyo río corría por delante o por detrás: no habría sabido decirlo; al fondo, en cualquier caso, del huerto de la posada. Había tenido otras aventuras antes de la presente; había seguido subiendo después de despejarse la modorra; había admirado, codiciado casi, otra pequeña iglesia antigua, de empinada techumbre de pizarra, totalmente enjalbegada y con flores de papel en el interior; se había perdido y había acabado por orientarse; había charlado con campesinos que le habían parecido quizá un poco más hombres de mundo de lo que había esperado; había adquirido de pronto una desenvuelta facilidad para el francés; había tomado, al caer la noche, un *bock* flojo, rubio, parisiense, en el café del pueblo de más allá, que no era el más grande; y en ningún momento había salido del marco dorado y oblongo. El marco se había dilatado para él hasta lo insospechado; pero en aquello consistía su fortuna. Había vuelto a bajar finalmente al valle, para no alejarse demasiado de las estaciones y los trenes, en dirección al apeadero del que había partido; fue así como vino a parar ante la mesonera del «Cheval Blanc», que le atendió, con una burda solicitud semejante al golpetear de los zuecos en los adoquines, en el común trámite de una *côtelette de veau à l'oseille* y el consiguiente estímulo. Había andado muchos kilómetros y no sentía cansancio alguno; sólo sabía que estaba contentó y que, aunque hubiera estado solo todo el día, nunca se había imaginado tan en contacto con los otros, tan en medio de la corriente de su drama. Podía haberse dado por terminado, el drama en cuestión, sin haber llegado al desenlace; había comprendido, sin embargo, con claridad meridiana que le estaba poniendo dicho desenlace en bandeja. Pero no podía sino advertir que proseguía.

Pues en esto había consistido durante todo el día, en el fondo, el influjo del cuadro: sustancialmente, antes que nada, una escena y un escenario, así como podía decirse que la atmósfera de la obra estaba en el rumor de los cipreses y las tonalidades del cielo. La obra y los personajes, sin que lo hubiera advertido hasta entonces, habían llenado su espacio en su sentir y parecía no poco afortunado que aparecieran, en circunstancias tan favorables, con una especie de inevitabilidad. Era como si las circunstancias no sólo los hicieran inevitables, sino tanto más próximos a la naturalidad y la justicia cuanto que por fin eran más agradables y liberales de lo que podía soportarse. En ninguna parte habían hecho valer tanto las circunstancias su diferencia respecto de las de Woollett como en el pequeño patio del «Cheval Blanc», mientras preparaba con la mesonera un ambiente cómodo. Eran escasas y sencillas, menudas y humildes, pero constituían el *meollo,* que habría podido decir, incluso en mayor medida que el alto y antiguo salón de Mme. de Vionnet, donde campaba el fantasma del imperio. «El» meollo era el núcleo que implicaba el mayor número de elementos que había tenido que afrontar; y era curioso, desde luego, pero no era para menos: la implicación aquí era completa. Ni una sola de sus observaciones podía por menos de encontrar un

sitio; ni una ráfaga del fresco anochecer podía por menos de corresponder a una sílaba del texto. El texto decía simplemente, cuando se resumía, que en *tales* sitios había tales cosas, y que si a uno le tocaba desplazarse por ellos tenía que confiar en lo que alcanzara a entender. Mientras tanto, en cualquier caso, bastaba con que a uno se le antojasen —en la medida en que afectaban al aspecto del pueblo— una combinación de lo blanco, lo azul, lo tortuoso y el verdor manchado: pues, para el caso, allí estaba el muro exterior del «Caballo Blanco», pintado de la manera más inverosímil. Esto era parte del entretenimiento: como para dar a entender que éste era inofensivo; del mismo modo que bastaba, además, que cuadro y obra parecieran fundirse al máximo en el generoso bosquejo de la buena mujer tocante a lo que podía hacer para saciar el apetito del forastero. En suma, tenía confianza, ésta era global y era lo único que quería tener. No le impresionó que dijera la mujer que, a decir verdad, acababa de poner la mesa para dos personas que, a diferencia de Monsieur, habían llegado por el río: en barca propia; que le habían pedido media hora antes que proveyera por ellos y que se habían alejado a hacer no sé qué un poco más arriba: paseo del que no tardarían en volver. Monsieur podía, mientras tanto, si gustaba, pasar al jardín, donde ella le serviría, si nada objetaba él —pues había fuera mesas y bancos en abundancia— una «cervecita» antes de la comida. También le informaría la mujer de la posibilidad de llevarle a la estación y, en cualquier caso, gozaría del *agrément* del río.

Podría añadirse que Monsieur gozó del *agrément* de todo y, en particular en el curso de los veinte minutos que siguieron, de un pequeño y vetusto cenador que, al extremo del jardín, casi pendía sobre el agua, dando fe, con su estado más bien ruinoso, de su nutrida frecuentación. Consistía en poco más que una plataforma, ligeramente elevada, con un par de bancos y una mesa, una barandilla protectora y un techo en punta; pero daba al pletórico torrente, entre grisáceo y azulenco, que, formando una curva un poco más allá, desaparecía para volver a aparecer mucho más arriba; y a las claras se advertía que se le requería con estima para los domingos y otras festividades. Strether permaneció allí y, aunque con hambre, se sentía en paz; la confianza que había reunido se intensificaba con el chapoteo del agua, la ondulación de la superficie, el murmullo de los juncos de la otra orilla, la perceptible frescura dominante y el ligero balanceo de un par de botes, encallados en un tosco varadero. El valle que se abría enfrente era una mancha de verde sucio frenada por la transparencia del cielo perlado, un cielo sustentado por cortinas de árboles bien ordenados, de poca altura, semejantes a espalderas; y aunque el pueblo se desplegaba a corta distancia, el paisaje daba una sensación de vacío y soledad que volvía sugerentes los botes. Un río de tal condición lo ponía a uno a flote antes siquiera de empuñar los remos, cuyo tranquilo ejercicio bien podía ser, además, el colofón de la imagen conjunta. La impresión se intensificó hasta el punto de que Strether acabó poniéndose en pie; pero este movimiento, a su vez, le hizo sentir otra vez que estaba cansado y mientras se apoyaba en un poste y seguía mirando vio algo que le hizo dar un levísimo respingo.

III

Lo que vio no fue ni más ni menos que lo que tenía que ver: una barca que rodeaba el meandro, con un hombre que empuñaba los zaguales y una dama, a popa, con una sombrilla de color de rosa. Fue como si, repentinamente, aquellas figuras, o algo semejante a ellas, se hubieran precisado en la imagen, se hubieran precisado, más o menos, durante todo el día, y se hubieran dejado ver a la sazón, merced al lento curso del río, con el fin de colmar la medida. Avanzaban muy despacio, evidentemente en busca del varadero próximo al espectador y suponiéndoles con no menor claridad las dos personas para las que la mesonera había preparado la comida. En el acto les tomó por dos personas muy felices: un joven en mangas de camisa, una mujer también joven, elegante y hermosa, que llegaban desenvueltamente de cualquier parte y que, encantados con la zona, se habían percatado de lo que aquel particular retiro podía prodigarles. El aire condensaba otras intimaciones a medida que se acercaban; la intimación de que tenían experiencia, conocimiento y soltura: que aquella no era, en modo alguno, la primera vez. Sabían cómo desenvolverse, intuía vagamente, y esto no hacía sino darles un talante más idílico; aunque en aquel preciso momento la embarcación parecía estar a merced de la corriente, el remero no parecía preocupado. Por entonces, sin embargo, se encontraban ya mucho más cerca: lo bastante cerca para que Strether imaginara que la dama de popa, por la razón que fuere, se había dado cuenta de que él les estaba observando. Había hecho ella la indicación oportuna, pero su compañero no se había vuelto; era, a decir verdad, casi como si nuestro amigo hubiera oído a la mujer recomendar al compañero que no se girase. Había comprendido la mujer alguna cosa a cuyo imperio se había amortiguado la marcha y siguió amortiguándose mientras los ocupantes permanecían inmóviles. Fue un hecho repentino y veloz, tan veloz que la apercepción de Strether no se dio, sino con un segundo de diferencia, al mismo tiempo que su sobresalto. Antes de que finalizara aquel intenso minuto había comprendido también algo: él conocía a la dama cuya sombrilla, inclinada como con ánimo

de ocultar el rostro, ponía su detalle rosa en el hermoso escenario. Era demasiado extraordinario, una posibilidad entre un millón; pero, puesto que conocía a la dama, el caballero, que todavía le daba la espalda, el caballero, galán sin chaqueta del idilio, que había respondido a la prevención femenina, no era, en correspondencia con la asombrosa coincidencia, otro que Chad.

Chad y Mme. de Vionnet, al igual que él, habían ido a pasar el día en el campo, aunque era tan extraño como la ficción, como la farsa, que su campo tuviera que ser precisamente aquél; y ella había sido la primera en reconocer, la primera en sentir, desde el río, lo chocante —pues no menos había sido— de la extraordinaria casualidad. Strether se dio cuenta entonces de lo que sucedía: que la apercepción femenina había sido incluso más extraña para la pareja de la barca, que el inmediato impulso de la mujer había sido dominarla y que discutía con Chad, con celeridad y vehemencia, los riesgos de la identificación. Se dio cuenta el hombre de que la pareja no se traicionaría si se aseguraba de que él no la había descubierto; de modo que tuvo que debatirse durante unos segundos con su propia vacilación. Era una situación crítica, desasosegadora, fantástica, que había desembocado en una suerte de sueño y que en los últimos segundos de su brevedad vino a considerar el hombre *totalmente horrible*. Los otros, por su lado, seguían consultándose, y por el motivo que fuere aquello rompió la inmovilidad como un detalle tan espontáneo como desapacible. Le pareció, al limite ya, que no podía sino hacer una cosa: acoger la presencia de la pareja con alguna muestra de sorpresa y alegría. Dio por tanto rienda suelta a estas manifestaciones, agitando el sombrero y el bastón, y dando grandes voces: alharacas que le devolvieron la tranquilidad en cuanto se vio correspondido. La barca, en medio de la corriente, seguía zozobrando.un tanto: cosa bastante natural, empero, pues Chad se había vuelto medio impulsado por un muelle; mientras su buena amiga, repuesta de la perplejidad y el asombro, se ponía a agitar la sombrilla. Chad empuñó con resolución los zaguales y la embarcación dio la vuelta, llenando la atmósfera de sorpresa y alegría, y también de un alivio, mientras Strether seguía haciendo cábalas, que vino a sustituir a la desnuda violencia. Nuestro amigo bajó al río dominado por esta extraña sensación de violencia latente: la violencia de que hubieran fingido no conocerle, allí, en plena naturaleza, con la suposición de que no se daría cuenta. Les esperó con una cara de la que sabía no había podido borrar la impresión de que habrían continuado río abajo, sin mirarle, sin reconocerle, descuidando la cena y burlando a la mesonera, de haber hecho él lo mismo. Esto, cuando menos, era lo que oscurecía su perspectiva por el momento. Luego, cuando hubieron encallado en el varadero y les hubo ayudado a salir de la embarcación, todo desapareció a instancias del milagro del encuentro.

Pudieron así, por fin, cada cual por su lado, enfocarlo como si hubiera sido una especulación insensata y ninguna otra cosa, que la situación había de volver elástica en virtud de las explicaciones pertinentes. Por qué —extrañeza aparte— la situación había sido realmente tensa era un tema muy poco práctico en aquel momento y, a decir verdad, un tema que, sólo sería abordado, más tarde y en privado, por Strether. Reflexionaría más tarde y en privado que había sido él quien más explicaciones había dado y que, además, había tenido, relativamente, muy pocas dificultades en hacerlo. Hubo de soportar, en cualquier caso, mientras tanto, la molesta idea de que ellos tal vez alimentasen la sospecha de que la coincidencia había sido obra suya, tras esforzarse al máximo porque tuviera el aspecto de una casualidad. Esta posibilidad —la de la acusación— no resistía, naturalmente, el menor análisis; sin embargo, el incidente todo era tan manifiestamente extraño, según deducirían ellos por su cuenta, que apenas si pudo hacer otra cosa que justificar su presencia en aquel lugar. Las negativas intencionales habrían sido tan carentes de tacto como prácticamente inoportuna su presencia; y la mezquina escapatoria que cualquiera de ellas representaba era haber evitado, por fortuna, tal patinazo. Nada se ponía siquiera en duda, por lo menos en lo que tocaba a la superficie y las palabras; la superficie y las palabras justificaban su ridícula buena suerte, la total *invraisemblance* de la ocasión, que por una feliz coincidencia hubieran, los otros, encargado la cena, que por una feliz coincidencia él no hubiera comido, que por una feliz coincidencia sus pequeños planes, su horario, su tren, en suma, de *là-bas* se hubieran confabulado para regresar juntos a París. La coincidencia más feliz de todas, la coincidencia que arrancó a Mme. de Vionnetsu más diáfano y alegre *«Comme cela se trouve»!* fue el aviso que se dio a Strether, una vez que estuvieron sentados todos juntos, las palabras que le dirigió la mesonera respecto del vehículo que le llevaría a la estación, con que ya podía contar. El tema afectó también a sus amigos; el medio de transporte —¡qué buena suerte!— lo utilizarían ellos asimismo; y nada fue más delicioso que estar nuestro amigo en situación de ser igual, de categórico con el tren. Es posible que hubiera sido, por lo que a ellos respectaba —por oír a Mme. de Vionnet—, casi anormalmente vago, un detalle en el aire, aunque Strether recordaría después que Chad se había apresurado a prevenir esta apariencia, riéndose de la frivolidad de su compañera y señalando que él, a fin de cuentas, a pesar de lo maravilloso de la jornada pasada fuera con ella, sabía lo que iba a hacer.

Strether, además, recordaría después que aquélla se le había antojado en resumen casi la única intervención de Chad; y recordaría también, en meditación subsiguiente, muchas cosas que encajaban entre

sí. Una de ellas, por ejemplo, era que la sobreabundante sorpresa y alegría de la mujer se habían dado en francés, un francés que le había parecido dotado de un insólito dominio de los giros y locuciones, pero con el que ella, por así decir, se apartaba de él, afrontándolo todo con pequeños saltos verbales que él no habría podido igualar sino cojeando. El francés del hombre no había sido nunca tema de realce para ellos; era algo que ella no se habría permitido: pertenecía, para una persona que había renunciado a tanto, al simple aburrimiento; pero el efecto de la presente circunstancia era bien singular, ocultaba a las claras su identidad, la relegaba a la raza o clase voluble con cuya notoria sonoridad había tenido ya el hombre sus intercambios. Cuando hablaba ella en el inglés encantador y un tanto extraño que le conocía, se le antojaba una criatura que destacaba entre millones con un idioma propio, verdadero monopolio de una inflexión especial, endiabladamente fácil para ella y sin embargo de una musicalidad y una cadencia que eran tan inimitables como cuestión de azar. Recuperó tales atributos cuando entraron en el comedor de la posada y supo lo que iba a ocurrirles; era inevitable que la primera exclamación a propósito del prodigio del encuentro acabara por desvanecerse. Fue entonces cuando su impresión adquirió plena forma: la impresión, destinada únicamente a consolidarse, a completarse, de que tenían algo que encarar, que llevar a cabo y que resolver, y de que era ella quien, de manera admirable en términos generales, iba a hacerlo. No le cogía de nuevas, naturalmente, que tuvieran algo que encarar; su amistad, su relación precisaban ciertas explicaciones: no le habría cogido de nuevas merced a los veinte minutos pasados con la señora Pocock si no hubiera estado alerta antes. Sólo que su teoría, como sabemos, había sido que, con notoria generosidad, los hechos presentes, en términos concretos, no eran asunto suyo y que había que adoptar al respecto, en todos los sentidos, una actitud imparcial; es posible que esto le hubiese preparado para cualquier cosa, al tiempo que le prevenía contra la confusión. Cuando llegó a casa aquella noche, sin embargo, supo que en el fondo no había elaborado ninguna prevención; y puesto que hemos hablado de lo que había de recordar e interpretar luego de su regreso, podemos añadir inmediatamente que la experiencia de las horas anteriores puso en escena, en aquella representación diferida —pues no tuvo deseos de acostarse hasta la madrugada — el aspecto que nos interesa.

Supo entonces lo afectado que se había sentido, pues no lo había sabido más que a medias hasta el momento. Y había venido a afectarle después, como se ha dicho, de tomar asiento juntos; en su conciencia, no obstante amortiguada, los más peliagudos momentos de aquel episodio tenían un marcado resabio de la bohemia cordial e inocente. Habían apoyado los codos en la mesa y deplorado el precoz término de los dos o tres platos consumidos; que habían querido prolongar con otra botella mientras Chad gastaba bromas un tanto histriónicas, y quizá un tanto irrelevantes, a la mesonera. Lo que ocurría era que la ficción y el fingimiento pesaban, inevitablemente en la atmósfera y no a modo de símil, sino como consecuencia de las cosas que se habían dicho; aparte de que lo soslayaban, de manera absoluta, y de que no tenían ninguna necesidad, no tanta por lo menos, de soslayarlo: aunque, francamente, si no la tenían Strether no comprendía muy bien qué otra cosa habrían podido hacer. Strether no comprendía muy bien *aquello* ni siquiera a la una o las dos de la madrugada, ni siquiera cuando, en su hotel, durante un buen rato, a oscuras y vestido, hubo de sentarse en el sofá del dormitorio y quedarse allí pensativo. Estaba, en tal punto estratégico, en plena posesión de sus facultades y dispuesto a llegar adonde supiese. Seguía pensando que se había dado una *mentira* en aquel hermoso asunto: una mentira que en aquel momento, con la necesaria distancia y reflexión, se podía señalar. Habían comido, bebido, hablado y reído con aquel embuste, con él habían esperado la *carriole* más bien impacientemente y con él habían subido al vehículo y, discretamente acomodados, recorrido los seis o siete kilómetros en la noche estival, cada vez más oscura. La comida y la bebida, que habían sido un recurso, habían tenido por resultado la forja de una función; la charla y las risas habían hecho otro tanto; y había sido durante el en cierto modo tedioso viaje a la estación, durante la ulterior espera y las subsiguientes demoras, el abandono al cansancio, el silencio reinante en el compartimento mal iluminado de aquel tren que gustaba de las paradas, cuando se había preparado para las reflexiones que seguirían. Había sido una interpretación, el comportamiento de Mme. de Vionnet, y aunque en este sentido había carecido de culminación, como si hubiera dejado de creer en ella, como si se hubiera preguntado, o Chad hubiera encontrado un momento para preguntarle subrepticiamente, qué sentido tenía una interpretación que sin embargo se había desarrollado con bastante dignidad, con el resultado final de que era, en conjunto, más fácil de mantener que de abandonar.

Desde el punto de vista de la presencia de ánimo había sido extraordinario, extraordinario por la preparación, por la hermosa seguridad, por la forma en que la mujer tomó la decisión allí mismo, sin tiempo de parlamentar con Chad, sin tiempo para nada. Su único parlamento había sido tal vez el breve tracto pasado en el bote antes de admitir que reconocían al espectador de la orilla: tanto más cuanto que no habían estado solos ni un momento desde entonces y tenían que habérselo comunicado todo en silencio. Parte de la profunda impresión de Strether, y no la de menor profundidad, era que *podían* haberse comunicado así: que Chad había podido hacerle saber que lo dejaba en sus manos. Era hombre que

habitualmente confiaba las cosas a-los demás, como bien sabía Strether, y a decir verdad se le ocurrió a nuestro amigo en el curso de tales meditaciones que no se había dado ningún ejemplo serio de su famoso conocimiento de la vida. Era como si hubiera complacido a la mujer hasta el extremo de dejarla mentir sin medida, un poco como si, en realidad, hubiera de presentarse a la mañana siguiente para poner las cosas en su justo lugar, como asunto particular entre Strether y él. Por supuesto, no lo haría en absoluto; se trataba de un caso en que un hombre estaba obligado a aceptar la versión de la mujer, por fantástica que fuese. Si bien la mujer, con más nerviosismo del que había cuidado de manifestar, había preferido, pues tal podía decirse, aparentar que habían salido de París aquella misma mañana y sin el menor proyecto de volver el mismo día: si bien no había calculado al milímetro, según expresión de Woollett, la común necesidad, conocía al dedillo su propia medida. Había cosas, de todos modos, que era imposible soslayar y que convertían la medida en bien extraña: el hecho demasiado evidente, por ejemplo, de que no se había vestido y calzado, y hasta si a ello vamos, provisto de la sombrilla rosada para pasar fuera solamente un día. ¿De dónde había venido el tambaleo de su seguridad a medida que aumentaba la tensión, de dónde había partido aquella ingenuidad apenas velada sino de su conciencia de no ofrecer, en pleno anochecer, sin un chal siquiera que ponerse, un aspecto que concordase con su versión de los hechos? Había admitido que tenía frío, pero sólo para maldecir inmediatamente su imprudencia, que Chad hubo de sufrirle y justificar diciendo que era posible. El chal y el sobretodo de

Chad, así como las demás prendas femeninas, y las del hombre también, las que habían vestido el día anterior, estaban en el lugar, que ellos conocerían muy bien —un retiro bastante tranquilo, sin duda— en que habían pasado las veinticuatro horas, al que habían querido volver aquella misma noche, del que habían partido por vía fluvial hasta topar con Strether, y el tácito repudio del cual había sido, por consiguiente, la esencia de la comedia femenina. Strether había visto que la mujer se había dado cuenta al instante de que no podían ni pensar en volver en las propias barbas del amigo; aunque, honradamente, mientras profundizaba con mayor ahínco en el tema, estaba en cierto modo sorprendido, como Chad lo había estado quizá, de la aparición de aquel escrúpulo. Le parecía adivinar que la mujer lo había alimentado más por Chad que por ella y que, como el joven había carecido de ocasión para respaldarla, la mujer había tenido que proseguir mientras su compañero malinterpretaba sus motivos.

Estaba contento, sin embargo, por no haberse separado en el «Cheval Blanc», por no haberse visto obligado a darles su bendición en nombre de un idílico refugio río abajo. Se había visto obligado en aquel caso a fingir más de lo que le habría parecido tolerable, pero le pareció que era una nadería en comparación con lo que lo otro habría exigido. ¿Habría podido, literalmente, soportar lo otro? ¿Habría sido capaz de salir con bien ante ellos en tal brete? Era esto lo que intentaba hacer en aquel momento; pero con la ventaja de poder dedicarle más tiempo, contrarrestado en buena medida por su apercepción de lo que, con todo y con eso, tendría que tragar. Implicaba la magnitud del fingimiento y con tanta viveza ejemplificado que su estómago del espíritu se resentía al máximo. Pasó, sin embargo, de la consideración de dicha magnitud —por no hablar de la conciencia del órgano mencionado— al otro adorno del espectáculo, la verdad, la profunda verdad de la intimidad revelada. En esto era en lo que, en su ésteril vigilia, había insistido con más frecuencia: ¿era la intimidad, en tal punto, efectivamente individual? ¿Y qué otra cosa habría querido uno que fuese? Encontraba cierto placer en lamentar que no fuera a quedar sino en agua de borrajas; casi se ruborizó, en la oscuridad, de haber adornado la posibilidad en abstracto, como una niña balbuciente podía haber acicalado su muñeca. El les había obligado —y sin que ellos tuvieran la culpa— a sacar momentáneamente la posibilidad de la abstracción para su propio provecho; ¿no debía por tanto tomarlo él como ellos, con los atenuantes que se quieran, se habían visto forzados a ofrecérselo? Esta sola pregunta, habría que añadir, le hizo sentirse solo y con frío. El elemento de lo desagradable pesaba en todas partes, pero Chad y Mme. de Vionnet tenían el consuelo de poder hablar de ello. ¿Con quién podía hablar él de tales cosas, sino, como siempre, casi en cada etapa, con María? Preveía el interrogatorio de la señorita Gostrey al día siguiente; y no sería justo negar que tenía ya su poco de miedo ante su: «Pero hombre de Dios, ¿qué otra cosa se había figurado usted?» Reconoció al final que, en todo aquel tiempo, había hecho lo posible por no figurarse nada. A decir verdad, su esfuerzo había sido inútil. Pues se lo había figurado todo.

Libro duodécimo

I

Indudablemente no habría podido decir que lo hubiese esperado durante las horas anteriores; sin

embargo cuando, más tarde, por la mañana —aunque no después de la diez—, vio que el conserje sacaba, al acercarse a él, un *petit bleu* entregado después de haber subido su correspondencia, estimó la aparición como el primer síntoma de una serie. Advirtió entonces que había estado pensando que lo más probable sería que Chad se manifestase primero de alguna forma; y que aquella sería su primera señal. Lo daba tan por sentado que abrió el *petit bleu* en el mismo lugar en que se había detenido, en la fresca brisa de la *porte-cochère,* curioso por ver por dónde respiraría el joven en tal coyuntura. Su curiosidad, sin embargo, quedó más que satisfecha; el pequeño mensaje, cuyo borde engomado había despegado sin prestar atención al remitente, no era en modo alguno del joven, sino de la persona a quien el caso volvía, según él, más importante si cabe. Más importante o no, el caso es que se dirigió a la oficina de telégrafos más cercana, la mayor del Boulevard, con una decisión que casi confesaba temer el peligro de la demora. Es posible que pensara que si no iba antes acabara por pensar que quizá no fuera de ninguna de las maneras. En cualquier caso mantenía, en un bolsillo inferior externo de la chaqueta, una muy decidida mano en derredor del mensaje azul, que apretaba más con ternura que con rudeza. Escribió la respuesta en el Boulevard, también con la forma de *petit bleu,* que concluyó en seguida, a instancias del lugar, tanto más cuanto que, al igual que el comunicado de Mme. de Vionnet, contenía el mínimo de palabras. Le había pedido ella si el hombre le haría el inmenso favor de ir a verla aquella noche, a las nueve y media, y él respondía, como si se tratase de lo más normal del mundo, que allí estaría a la hora mencionada. Había añadido la mujer una línea, a modo de postdata, notificando que, si él así lo prefería, sería ella la que fuese à verle y a la hora que él indicase; pero el hombre no hizo caso de esto, sabiendo que si la veía, la mitad del valor de la experiencia radicaría en verla donde él la había visto en sus mejores momentos. No podía verla de ninguna de las maneras; esta fue una de las reflexiones que se hizo tras escribir y antes de echar la tarjeta en el buzón; nunca más podría ver a nadie; podía poner punto final en aquel momento lo mismo que en cualquier otro, dejar las cosas como estaban, puesto que él, sin duda, no iba a mejorarlas, y volver a casa mientras le quedase una casa.donde volver. Durante unos momentos esta alternativa fue tan acuciante que si al final echó la misiva fue quizás porque el lugar hacía sentir su influencia.

No había, sin embargo, más que la influencia normal y corriente, conocida de nuestro amigo, de la rúbrica de Postes et Télégraphes; lo que flotaba en el ambiente de tales establecimientos; la palpitación de la vasta y extraña vida de la ciudad; el influjo de los tipos, las ejecutantes, que maduraban sus mensajes; las pequeñas y veloces parisienses que ordenaban, pretextanto Dios sabe qué, las espantosas plumas de uso público clavándolas en las espantosas mesas de uso público y sucias de arena; elementos que simbolizaban para la inocencia demasiado interpretadora de Strether algo más peligroso en la conducta, más siniestro en la ética, más desenfrenado en la vida nacional. Él mantenía una correspondencia, en la gran ciudad, totalmente a tono con las Postes et Télégraphes en sentido global; y era como si la asunción de este hecho hubiera surgido de una faceta de su situación que casase con el menester de sus conciudadanos. Estaba totalmente sumido en la típica historia de París y lo mismo le ocurría a los demás, pobres criaturas: ¿cómo podía ser de otro modo? No eran peores que él, en suma, y él no era peor que ellos, aunque, cosa extraña, tampoco mejor: en cualquier caso, había puesto cada cosa en su sitio y se dispuso a comenzar, desde aquel mismo momento, su jornada de espera. La genial ordenación apuntada tendía a que su corresponsal se encontrase en condiciones óptimas. E*sto* era parte de la historia típica, la parte más significativa respecto de sí mismo. Le gustaba el lugar en que vivía la mujer, la imagen que, cada vez, se acomodaba, con su altura, su longitud y su claridad, en torno a ella: cada ocasión de verlo era un placer con nuevos matices. Sin embargo, ¿de qué le servían ya los matices del placer y por qué, con toda lógica y propiedad, no la había instado a que aceptase las trabas e inconvenientes que la situación exigiese? Podía haber sugerido, como en el caso de Sarah Pocock, la fila hospitalidad de su propio *salon de lecture,* en que el hielo de la visita de Sarah parecía vibrar todavía y donde los matices del placer eran mínimos; podía haberle sugerido un banco de piedra de las polvorientas Tullerías o una silla de a real al final de los Campos Elíseos. Tales detalles habrían sido un poco austeros y la austeridad sola en aquel momento no sería siniestra. Cierto instinto le inclinaba por cualquier forma de disciplina en el encuentro: alguna incomodidad que tuvieran que soportar, algún peligro o, cuando menos, alguna seria inconveniencia en que incurrir. Esto aportaría la sensación —que el espíritu exigía, más bien dolorido y nostálgico en su ausencia— de que alguien estaba purgando algo en alguna parte y de alguna manera, de que por lo menos no se mantenían a flote en el riachuelo argentino de la impunidad. Sin embargo, ir a verla a última hora de la tarde, como si, a pesar de todo... bueno, como si él estuviese en la misma corriente en el mismo sentido que los otros, tenía muy poco que ver con el rigor disciplinario.

Aun cuando se dio cuenta de que la objeción perdía su razón de ser, la diferencia práctica fue mínima; el largo trecho de su intervalo adoptaría el tenor que fuese y si soportaba la continua presencia de lo siniestro resultaría entonces algo más llevadero de lo previsto. Evocó su antigua tradición, aquella con la que se había educado y que, a pesar de los años, había sufrido una erosión inapreciable; la idea de que la

situación del pecador, o por lo menos la felicidad de éste, sufría serias dificultades. Lo que le chocaba era el desahogo de la misma, pues, a decir verdad, nada parecía más desahogado. Fue un desahogo que probó durante el resto del día; abandonándose por entero; sin llegar al extremo de revestir ningún detalle de conflictividad; sin ir, en definitiva, a ver a María, cosa que habría sido, en cierto modo, resultado de dicho revestimiento: sino gozando del ocio, paseando, fumando, sentándose en la sombra, tomando limonada y consumiendo helados. El día se había vuelto muy caluroso, al final hubo tormenta y de vez en cuando volvía a su hotel para enterarse de que Chad no había estado allí. No se había tenido, desde que salió de Woollett, por un holgazán, pero veces había habido en que había estado muy cerca de creerlo. El fondo de la cuestión tenía sus simas, pero ninguna previsión de lo que sacaría a la luz. Casi se preguntaba si tendría un *aspecto* desanimado y vergonzoso; se imaginaba, mientras permanecía sentado y fumando, que por justificada casualidad los Pocock se veían obligados a volver y que al pasar por el Boulevard le descubrían. A juzgar sólo por su aspecto, habrían tenido claramente un buen motivo de escándalo. Pero el destino no le concedió ni siquiera este castigo; los Pocock no pasaban y Chad no daba señales de vida. Strether, mientras tanto, seguía alejándose de la señorita Gostrey, postponiéndola hasta el día siguiente; de modo que al caer la noche, su irresponsabilidad, su inquietud y su ocio se habían hecho —no había otro término— enormes.

Entre las nueve y las diez, en aquel cuadro alto y despejado —aquellos días parecía ir, como si estuviera en una galería, de un lienzo hábil a otro inteligente—, tomó una gran bocanada de aire; tan claro tenía desde el principio que el hechizo de su ocio no se rompería. Es decir, no tendría que sentirse responsable, cosa que, de manera admirable, estaba en el aire: ella le había llamado, precisamente, para hacérselo sentir, de modo que él pudiera proseguir con tranquilidad —una tranquilidad ya predispuesta, ¿no?— de considerar su ordalia, la ordalia de las semanas de estancia de Sarah y su crisis, totalmente satisfecha y dejada atrás. ¿Acaso no quería confirmar al hombre que *ella* se hacía cargo de todo? Que él no hubiera de preocuparse nunca más, ¿significaba sólo que hubiera de dormirse en los laureles y seguir ayudando generosamente a la mujer? La luz de la hermosa sala era tenue, aunque bastaría, como siempre bastaba todo; el calor de la noche había mantenido las luces apagadas, pero había un par de candelabros que resplandecía en la cornisa de la chimenea como los grandes cirios de un altar. Las ventanas estaban totalmente abiertas, los superfluos visillos se agitaban un tanto y alcanzaba a oír una vez más el leve gorgoteo de la fuente del jardín vacío. Procedente del otro lado, y como si estuviera a gran distancia —más allá del jardín, más allá del *corps de logis* de la fachada— se oía, como excitada y excitante, la confusa voz de París. Strether había sufrido ininterrumpidamente repentinos arrebatos de la fantasía en relación con elementos como aquellos: extraños sobresaltos de intuición histórica, suposiciones y adivinanzas sin más justificación que la intensidad de las mismas. Así, en la víspera de las grandes fechas registradas, los días y las noches de revolución, habían llegado los ecos, las profecías, y estallado el comienzo. Eran el olor de la revolución, el olor de la actitud del pueblo... o, tal vez, simplemente el olor de la sangre.

Era extraño, hasta lo indecible, «sutil», habría dicho él, que tales sugestiones palpitaran en la escena; pero sin duda era el efecto del aparato eléctrico que había amenazado durante todo el día. Su anfitriona estaba vestida con atuendo propio de día de lluvia y se le ocurrió, con la clase de imaginación que le hemos atribuido, que la mujer estaría vestida de blanco, con la blancura más sencilla y despejada, con un aire tan anticuado, si no se equivocaba, que Madame Roland, en el patíbulo, tendría que haber llevado algo parecido. Este efecto estaba realzado por una pañoleta negra, o un pañuelo, de gasa o de crespón, colocado singularmente alrededor del pecho y poniendo punto final, como por un retoque místico, la noble y sentimental analogía. El bueno de Strether apenas sabía qué analogía podía establecerse cuando la encantadora mujer, al recibirle y hacerle pasar, pues podía permitirse tales cosas, a la vez con seriedad y familiaridad, entraba en la gran sala, casi reproduciendo su figura en el brillante suelo, que había quedado totalmente despejado a causa del verano. Las evocaciones del lugar no permanecían ociosas; el resplandor ocasional, bajo la luz amortiguada, de los espejos, los destellos dorados y el parquet, fueron detalles al principio tan intangibles como si hubieran estado dotados de alguna cualidad espectral, y al hombre no le cupo la menor duda de que, encontrara lo que encontrase, no habría ido a buscar una impresión que le hubiera pasado anteriormente desapercibida. Esta convicción se le ocurrió al principio y, pareciendo que se simplificaba notablemente, no hizo sino garantizarle que los objetos le socorrerían, que socorrerían a ambos en realidad. No, no podía volver a verlos: aquella era probablemente la última vez; y a decir verdad no vería nada que se les pareciese ni remotamente. Pronto estaría donde tales cosas no existían y sería un bonito gesto de compasión para el recuerdo, para la fantasía, tener, en tal ansiedad, un sucedáneo a punto. Sabía de antemano que evocaría la impresión que le dominaba en aquel momento y que lo haría como si se tratase de lo más antiguo que le había afectado personalmente; y también sabía, mientras juzgaba a su compañera el detalle primordial, que el recuerdo y la fantasía no podrían por menos de estar a disposición de la mujer. Ella entendería lo que quisiese, pero aquello estaba más allá de cuanto alcanzara a comprender, junto a elementos de muy atrás —caprichos de la historia, características tipológicas, valores,

como decían los pintores, expresivos— que actuaban en favor de ella y le daban la suprema oportunidad, la oportunidad de las extraordinarias minorías afortunadas, la oportunidad, en una ocasión única, de ser natural y sencilla. Nunca lo había sido tanto con él; y si era aquello la perfección del arte, jamás —lo que venía a ser lo mismo— se probaría contra ella.

Lo realmente maravilloso era la forma en que la mujer discrepaba, de tarde en tarde, sin perjuicio de su sencillez. Las discrepancias, pensaría ella, sin duda, en el sentir del hombre, eran más importantes que cualquier otra mala costumbre y este criterio era en sí mismo más útil a la seguridad de las relaciones de cuanto había tenido en cuenta en las pasadas relaciones del hombre. Si la actitud femenina era por tanto muy distinta de la que había adoptado ante él la noche anterior, el cambio no entrañaría violencia, antes bien sería totalmente armónico y lógico. Esto le daba por resultado una persona dulce y profunda, mientras que, en la ocasión a que su entrevista era referencia directa, había tenido una persona abocada al movimiento y la superficie, y la reincidencia en ambos; pero en nada era más experta, fuera cual fuese su caracterización, que en salvar las pausas, cosa que casaba con lo que él comprendía iba a confiarle. La cosa era que si él iba a confiárselo *todo* ¿por qué le había llamado ella? El hombre había concebido de antemano una explicación, la probabilidad de que ella deseaba reparar alguna cosa, arreglar de alguna manera el fraude cometido últimamente con la presunta credulidad masculina. ¿Se arriesgaría a llevarlo hasta sus últimas consecuencias o acabaría liquidándolo? ¿Lo pintaría con colores más o menos alegres o no haría nada al respecto? Pronto advirtió que, por muy sensata que pudiera ser, la mujer no sufría una turbación vulgar, lo que le llevaba a creer que la palpable «mentira», la de Chad y ella, era, a fin de cuentas, un homenaje tan inevitable al buen gusto que Strether no les habría perdonado su omisión. Apartado de ellos, durante su vigilia, había considerado seriamente, al parecer, lo que el asunto tenía de comedia; mientras que en su presente actitud no podía por menos de preguntarse cuánto le alegraría que la mujer hiciese algún intento de representarla otra vez. No se alegraría en absoluto, pero podría confiar en ella otra vez. Es decir, podría confiarle la reparación del engaño. Mientras ella manejase los hechos, la fealdad —Dios sabía por qué— desaparecería de ellos; sin embargo de que además podría manejarlos, con su habilidad característica, sin tocarlos siquiera. En cualquier caso, ella dejaría el caso donde estaba: donde las anteriores veinticuatro horas lo habían puesto; al parecer, solamente para dar vueltas a su alrededor, con respeto, con ternura, casi con piedad, mientras la mujer se planteaba otras cosas.

Sabía ésta que no había engañado al hombre; esto, la noche anterior, antes de que se separasen, había quedado bastante claro; y así como le había llamado para saber hasta qué punto afectaba al hombre, así supo él al cabo de cinco minutos que se le había probado y tanteado. Había acordado con Chad, una vez que él se hubo despedido, que ella, para satisfacción propia, se aseguraría de dicha afección y Chad, como de costumbre, había dejado el caso en sus manos. Chad había confiado siempre en los demás cuando intuía que esto le beneficiaría de algún modo; y de algún modo, le beneficiaba siempre. Strether se sentía, cosa singular, ante tales hechos, nueva y generosamente pasivo; se había insistido tanto en que la pareja que tanto llamaba su atención tenía relaciones íntimas que su intervención había consolidado dicha intimidad y, en definitiva, tenía que aceptar las consecuencias. Con sus intuiciones y sus errores, con sus concesiones y sus reservas, la ridícula mezcla, como sin duda parecía a los demás, de su valentía y sus temores, en espectáculo general, en suma, de su habilidad y su inocencia, se había convertido, en términos absolutos, casi en un eslabón de refuerzo y, de hecho, en un inapreciable territorio propicio que ellos habían aprovechado. Fue como si estuviera oyendo el tono preciso de aquellos dos cuando la mujer sacó a relucir una alusión que era relativamente directa.

—Los dos últimas veces que estuvo usted aquí no se lo pedí —dijo ella con brusca transición, pues habían fingido, antes de esto, que no hablaban sino del encanto del día anterior y del interés que el campo había despertado en ellos. El esfuerzo fue manifiestamente inútil; pues ella no le había llamado para hablar de aquello; y el puntal nemotécnico de la mujer había sido que ellos habían hecho al respecto todo lo necesario cuando él había ido a verla tras la partida de Sarah. Lo que la mujer no le había pedido era que el hombre le dijese sin ambages hasta qué punto y en qué sentido podía contar con su apoyo; la mujer se había basado en la notificación que Chad le había hecho respecto de la velada intempestiva que habían pasado en el Boulevard Malesherbes. Lo que en consecuencia quería ella había llegado de la mano de las últimas ocasiones en que, de manera simpatizante y desinteresada, ella le había ahorrado toda inquietud. La presente noche, la verdad sea dicha, la mujer le inquietaría y en esto consistía su petición de que le permitiese afrontar el peligro. Al hombre no le importaría que ella le sondease un poco: se había comportado, a fin de cuentas, ¿no es cierto?, de manera tan maravillosa.

—Oh, tiene usted razón, tiene usted razón —afirmó el hombre casi con impaciencia; aunque su impaciencia, por otro lado, no se debía a la cuña femenina, sino a los escrúpulos de la mujer. El hombre iba entendiendo paulatinamente el diapasón a que sin duda había ajustado con Chad aquel asunto; y cada vez

veía más claro que la mujer había estado intranquila respecto de la naturaleza del «apoyo» masculino. Sí, se había discutido si él «apoyaba» el parecer que le había merecido la escena del río y, aunque el joven, sin duda, había votado en favor de la recuperación de Strether; la conclusión de la mujer había sido que no descansaría hasta comprobar por sí misma el estado de cosas. De aquello se trataba, sin lugar a dudas; la mujer lo *comprobaba* por sí misma; lo que podía apoyar o no, en aquellos momentos, lo tenía aún que resolver Strether, que estimaba, mientras se percataba de todo, que debía volver por sus fueros. Quería hacer ver que apoyaba todo lo que fuera humanamente posible; y advertía cierto imperio de la situación en aquel deseo de no parecer demasiado confuso. La mujer estaba dispuesta a todo, pero asimismo, con la misma suficiencia, estaba él; es decir, el hombre era en cierto sentido el más preparado de los dos, tanto más cuanto que, a pesar de toda la astucia femenina, no podía dar cuenta, detalle no poco chocante, del motivo de su conducta. El tenía la ventaja de que haber dicho que ella tenía razón le permitía ir más allá—. He tenido mucho gusto en venir, pero ¿deseaba usted decirme algo en particular? —Hablaba como si la mujer pudiera comprender que el hombre estaba esperando aquello: no, en realidad, de manera incómoda, pero sí con el natural interés. Entonces percibió que la mujer se echaba levemente hacia atrás, que estaba incluso sorprendida del detalle que se le había escapado: el único, la verdad sea dicha; pues había supuesto en cierto modo que el hombre sabría, advertiría, permitiría que ciertas cosas no se dijeran. Le miró la mujer, sin embargo, durante un momento, como si quisiera comunicar que si el hombre que las quería saber *todas*...

—Egoísta y vulgar, eso es lo que sin duda le parezco. Usted lo ha hecho todo por mí y aquí me tiene como si fuera a pedirle más. Pero no es —admitió la mujer— porque tenga miedo... aunque *tengo* miedo, desde luego, como cualquier mujer en mi situación. Quiero decir que no es porque una viva aterrada por lo que es egoísta, pues estoy dispuesta a darle mi palabra ahora mismo de que no me preocupa; no me preocupa lo que pueda ocurrir ni lo que yo pueda perder. No le pido que vuelva a prestarme su ayuda ni desearía tampoco tocar lo que hemos discutido en otras ocasiones, ni mi peligro ni mi seguridad, ni su madre ni su hermana, ni la muchacha con que él tal vez se case, ni la fortuna que puede ganar o perder, ni lo justo o injusto que él pueda hacer. Si después de los servicios que una ha recibido de usted no conoce una la discreción o simplemente no contiene la lengua, entonces tiene que abandonar toda pretensión de ser objeto de interés. Y si he querido retenerle ha sido en nombre de lo que *de veras* me preocupa. ¿Cómo voy a ser indiferente —preguntó— ante lo que usted pueda pensar de mí? —Y como él no supiese inmediatamente qué decir—: ¿Por qué, si usted se marcha, *necesitarle,* a fin de cuentas? ¿Le es imposible seguir como hasta ahora... de modo que no tenga una que perderle?

—¿Imposible que viva aquí cop ustedes en vez de irme?

—No «con» nosotros, si usted se opone a ello, pero cerca de nosotros, en alguna parte donde le podamos ver... bueno, hay que obeceder siempre los dictados del corazón. ¿Cómo no vamos a lamentarlo más de una vez? A menudo, cuando no tenía oportunidad, en el curso de estas últimas semanas —prosiguió la mujer—, he tenido deseos de verle a usted. ¿Cómo no voy a echarle de menos, sabiendo que se ha ido usted para siempre? —Entonces, como si la franqueza de esta solicitud, habiéndole cogido desprevenido, le hubiera dejado en visible perplejidad—: ¿Dónde está su «casa» en este momento, además...? ¿Qué ha sido de ella? I4e hecho que su vida cambiase, me doy cuenta; además he trastornado todo lo que usted pensaba; todas... ¿cómo le diría?, todas las convenciones y posibilidades. ¡Hace que aborrezca...! —Y en esto se detuvo.

Oh, pero él quería saberlo.

—¿Aborrecer qué?

—Todo... la vida.

—Ah, eso es demasiado —dijo él riendo— o demasiado poco.

—Demasiado poco, precisamente —la mujer estaba ávida—. En realidad me detesto a mí misma cuando pienso que para ser feliz he tenido que tomar tanto de la vida de los demás y que a pesar de todo no he conseguido esa felicidad. No lo hace una para engatusar la propia interioridad y acallar las propias quejas: no basta eso, en el mejor de los casos, sino transitoriamente. Esa desdichada interioridad está siempre ahí, provocándonos siempre una nueva insatisfacción. Lo que ocurre es que no existe nunca una felicidad, cualquiera que sea, que *tomar.* Dar es lo único seguro. Es lo que hace que sea uno menos falso. —Interesante, conmovedora, chocantemente sincera mientras manifestaba aquellas cosas, no cesaba de desconcertar y turbar al hombre: tan delicado era el trémolo de su serenidad. Intuía lo que había intuido siempre en ella, que siempre había más detrás de lo que manifestaba y, a su vez, mucho más detrás de aquello—. Usted sabe por lo menos —añadió— cuál es su postura, en tal caso.

—Entonces debe *usted* conocerla, sin duda; pues ¿no es precisamente lo que usted ha estado entregando lo que nos ha hecho coincidir en esta experiencia? Usted ha hecho, y se lo digo como lo siento —dijo Strether—, el más hermoso presente que yo haya visto en mi vida y si no encuentra usted satisfacción en

este hecho, entonces está usted, sin duda, condenada a seguir torturándose. Pero —concluyó— no debe preocuparse.

—Y no molestarle más, sin duda... no imponerle el asombro y la belleza de lo que yo haya hecho; tan sólo dejar que usted considere nuestro negocio concluido, cerrado y archivado, y dejarle marchar en una paz que comparto. Sin duda, sin duda, sin duda —repitió con nerviosismo la mujer—, sobre todo porque no pretendo creer que usted no podía, por su parte, *no* hacer lo que ha hecho. No pretendo que usted se crea una víctima, pues así es, evidentemente, como usted se siente, y que esto sea lo que estimamos mejor. Sí, tiene usted razón —prosiguió al cabo de un momento—, debo tranquilizarme y confiar en mi obra. Bueno, ya lo hago. Estoy tranquila. Llévese por lo menos esta última impresión. ¿Cuándo dice que se va? —preguntó con rápido cambio de tono.

Le costó un poco replicar al hombre, pues su última impresión se volvía cada vez más confusa. Producía en él una vaga decepción, un desmoronamiento más profundo que el derrumbe de su entusiasmo durante la noche anterior. El bien que hubiera hecho, si había hecho tanto, no estaba allí para animarle lo que habría hecho falta para un *finale* grandioso y alegre. Las mujeres eran infinitamente absorbentes y tratar con ellas equivalía a caminar sobre el agua. Lo que en el fondo importaba a la mujer, por más que lo negase y adornase la susodicha, era simplemente Chad. Era de Chad de quien, en resumidas cuentas, tenía miedo; la extraña fuerza de su pasión no era ni más ni menos que la fuerza del miedo; se aferraba a *él,* Lambert Strether, como a un manantial de seguridad que ella había probado y, por graciosa, generosa y sincera que quisiese mostrarse, a pesar de su exquisitez, temía que su manipulación conociese el punto final. Sabedor de estas cosas, sin embargo, era como un escalofrío que le traspasase, era casi espantoso que una criatura tan delicada fuera, en virtud de fuerzas misteriosas, una criatura tan exhausta. Pues, en última instancia, eran fuerzas misteriosas; ella había convertido a Chad en lo que era: así pues, ¿cómo se le podía ocurrir que lo había vuelto infinito? Lo había mejorado, lo había mejorado al máximo, lo había hecho como ningún otro; pero pensaba nuestro amigo con profunda extrañeza que, a pesar de todo, no era más que Chad. Strether tenía la impresión de que *él,* un poco, también había contribuido a transformarle; la elevada calificación de Strether había rubricado la obra de la mujer. La obra, no obstante admirable, era sin embargo de orden estrictamente humano y, en suma, era maravilloso que el compañero de alegrías simplemente mundanas, de libertades, de aberraciones —cualquiera que fuese su jerarquía— dentro de la normal experiencia, fuera apreciado de manera tan trascendental. Aquello podía haber puesto a Strether nervioso o retraído, como los secretos ajenos, cuando salen a la luz, suelen ponernos; pero lo que le sostenía era tan resistente que era prácticamente inflexible. No era ya el desconcierto de la noche anterior; que había pasado del todo, pues tales desconciertos no pasaban de meros detalles; la verdadera coacción era ver un hombre adorado hasta lo indecible. Nuevamente la presencia de las mujeres; si tratar con ellas era caminar sobre las aguas, ¿a quién extrañaba que el agua se sublevase? Y nunca, sin duda, se había sublevado tanto como alrededor de aquella mujer. Descubrió que la mujer le miraba fijamente y acto seguido supo el hombre que había dicho todo lo que pensaba.

—Tiene usted un miedo atroz.

Aquello interrumpió la prolongada observación y el hombre pronto supo por qué. El rostro femenino sufrió una contracción, las lágrimas que no había podido contener fluyeron al principio en silencio y a continuación, como la queja que emite de pronto el niño, entre espasmos y sollozos. Se cubrió la cara con las manos, dando de lado todo afán de comedimiento.

—Así es como me ve, así es como me ve —tragó aire al decir esto—, así es como me encuentro, así es como debo considerarme y, por supuesto, tiene poca importancia. —La tribulación femenina fue al principio tan incoherente que lo único que podía hacer él era permanecer allí, confundido y con la sensación de haberla molestado, aunque sabiendo que lo había hecho en nombre de la verdad. Tuvo que escucharla en un silencio que no pudo atenuar, sabiéndola doblemente desconsolada en medio de su menguada y desvanecida elegancia; aceptándolo como había aceptado lo demás e incluso advirtiendo una ligera ironía ante aquella elegancia cascada de bienaventuranzas. El no podía decir que tuviera poca importancia; pues supo en aquel momento que la estaba ayudando hasta el final: como si lo que él pensase de ella nada tuviese que ver. Era en realidad, por otro lado, como si no pensase de ella absolutamente nada, como si no pudiera pensar en otra cosa que la pasión, abismal, madura, misericordiosa, que ella representaba, y en las posibilidades que revelaba. La veía más vieja aquella noche, menos inmune, a las claras, al paso del tiempo; pero era, lo mismo que siempre, la criatura más elegante y delicada, la aparición más maravillosa que se le había permitido conocer en toda su vida; y sin embargo la veía allí, dolorida hasta la vulgaridad, como una criada que llora por su apuesto mozo. Sólo que ella se juzgaba a sí misma como la criada no haría; la debilidad de cuya sabiduría, además, la deshonra de cuyo juicio no parecía sino que la hundieran cada vez más. La crisis, sin embargo, fue breve y en cierto modo se había recuperado ya antes de que el hombre interviniera.

—Por supuesto que tengo mucho miedo. Pero no importa. No tiene la menor importancia.

El hombre siguió guardando silencio, como si pensara en lo que podía importar.

—Se me ocurre que todavía puedo hacer algo.

Pero la mujer rechazó al final, con brusca y triste cabezada, mientras se secaba los ojos, lo que el hombre podía hacer todavía.

—No me preocupa. Naturalmente, como le he dicho, se representa usted a sí mismo, con su maravilloso estilo; y lo que haga usted por su lado es tan de mi incumbencia, aunque puedo alargar estas manos impías torpemente para tocarlo, como si fuera algo ocurrido en Tombuctú. Es sólo que usted no me rechaza, como ha podido hacer cientos de veces... y su extraordinaria paciencia hace olvidar los propios modales. A pesar de su paciencia, de todos modos —prosiguió—, usted haría más que quedarse aquí con nosotros, aun si ello fuera posible. Usted lo haría todo por nosotros, salvo mezclarse con nosotros: una afirmación a la que podría usted responder fácilmente, confiando en sus buenos modales. Puede usted decir: «¿De qué sirve hablar de lo que es imposible?» En efecto: ¿de qué sirve? No es más que una pequeña locura mía. Usted hablaría si estuviera atormentado. Y no digo ahora a propósito de *él*. ¡Oh, para él...! —Con energía, con extrañeza, con amargura, pareció a Strether, la mujer lo dejó a «él» a un lado, por el momento—. A usted no le preocupa lo que yo piense de usted; pero ocurre que a mí sí me importa lo que usted piense de mí. Y lo que usted *pueda* pensar —añadió—. Lo que quizá haya hecho.

El hombre ganó tiempo.

—¿Lo que yo haya hecho?

—Lo que pensó antes. Antes de esto. ¿Acaso no pensó usted...?

Pero él ya la había atajado.

—Yo no pensaba nada. Nunca pienso ni un milímetro más de lo que debo.

—Eso es del todo falso, me temo —replicó ella—, sólo que usted, sin duda, puede detenerse cuando las cosas se ponen *demasiado* feas; y hasta, me atrevería a decir, para ahorrarle las protestas, demasiado hermosas. En cualquier caso, hasta donde es cierto, le hemos impuesto apariencias que usted ha tenido que ver y que por tanto han tenido que apelar a su sentido del deber. Feas o hermosas, no importa cómo las consideremos, usted se las apañaba bien sin ellas y en ese punto es donde somos detestables. Le aburrimos: aquí le digo lo mismo. Y bien que podemos... a pesar de lo que le hemos costado a usted. Lo único que puede hacer usted *ahora* es no pensar en absoluto. Y a mí que me habría gustado parecerme a usted... ¡magnífico, sublime!

Lo único que pudo hacer el hombre, al cabo de un momento, fue repetir las palabras de la señorita Barrace.

—Es usted maravillosa.

—Soy vieja, abyecta y repugnante —continuó la mujer sin prestar atención al hombre—. Sobre todo abyecta. O vieja sobre todo. Cuando una es vieja es peor. No me importa cómo termine esto... que sea lo que tenga que ser. Sé que es una maldición; usted no puede apreciarlo tanto como yo. Las cosas serán como tienen que ser. —Con lo que volvió a lo que había interrumpido—. Naturalmente, usted no estaría, aunque fuera posible y sin que influya lo que pueda sucederle, cerca de nosotros. ¡Pero piense en mí, piense en mí...! —exclamó.

El hombre se refugió en la repetición de algo que ya había dicho y que ella no había tomado en consideración.

—Creo que todavía puedo hacer algo. —Y alargó la mano para despedirse.

La mujer volvió a desoír aquellas palabras; seguía insistiendo.

—No le servirá de nada. No hay nada que pueda servirle.

—Bueno, tal vez le sirva a *usted* -dijo él.

La mujer negó con la cabeza.

—No hay ni un ápice de seguridad en mi futuro; pues lo único seguro es que al final saldré perdiendo.

La mujer no le había dado la mano, pero le acompañó hasta la puerta.

—¡Muy alentador —dijo él riendo— para su benefactor!

—Lo alentador para mí —replicó ella— es que usted y yo pudimos ser amigos. Esto sí lo es. Ya ve usted, como lo he dicho, que lo quiero todo. A usted también le he querido.

—Ah, pero usted me ha *tenido* -afirmó el hombre, ya en la puerta, con una vehemencia que puso fin a la conversación.

II

Su intención había sido ver a Chad al día siguiente y había imaginado que sería posible con una visita

temprana; pues, por regla general, nunca había guardado excesiva ceremonia respecto de las visitas al Boulevard Malesherbes. Había sido costumbre más lógica que fuera él allí que Chad acudiera al hotel, cuyos atractivos eran escasos; sin embargo, en aquel momento, las once aproximadamente, Strether consideró que debía empezar por dar una oportunidad al joven. Se le antojaba que, en aquel flujo inevitable, Chad estaría «al caer», como Waymarsh soda decir: Waymarsh que ya parecía, en cierto modo, tan lejano. No había ido a verlo la víspera porque había acordado con Mme. de Vionnet que ella lo vería primero; pero ahora que el trance ya había tenido lugar haría acto de presencia y el amigo no tendría que esperar mucho. Strether suponía, basándose en este razonamiento, que las partes interesadas en el acuerdo se habrían encontrado con tiempo y que la más interesada de las dos —que era ella, a fin de cuentashabría comunicado a la otra el resultado de su apelación. Chad sabría sin dilación que el mensajero de su madre había estado con ella y, aunque quizá no fuera fácil intuir cómo calificaría ella lo ocurrido, quedaría por lo menos suficientemente avisado para saber que podía continuar. El día, sin embargo, no alumbró, ni pronto ni tarde, la menor noticia del aludido y Strether supuso que, resultado de la situación, se había decidido un cambio a raíz del encuentro. Tal vez era un juicio prematuro; o quizá sólo significaba, ¿cómo decirlo?, que la maravillosa pareja que protegía había emprendido otra vez la excursión que él había interrumpido por casualidad. Podían haber vuelto al campo y vuelto de un tirón; esto, a decir verdad, caracterizaría mejor el conocimiento que Chad habría tenido de que no había sido la violencia lo que había acogido la súplica de Mme. de Vionnet. Al cabo de veinticuatro horas, al cabo de cuarenta y ocho seguía sin haber el menor rastro; de modo que Strether mató el tiempo, como tan a menudo lo había matado antes, yendo a ver a la señorita Gostrey.

Le propuso un poco de expansión; se consideraba ya experto en la propuesta de expansiones; vivió así, durante unos días, la rara experiencia de llevarla por todo París, de pasearla por el Bois, de enseñarle las pequeñas embarcaciones a vapor —desde las que se gozaba mejor la brisa del Sena— que podía haberse dado en el tío amable que enseña lo mejorcito de la capital a la sobrina inteligente que ha llegado del campo. Se las arregló incluso para llevarla a tiendas que la mujer no conocía o que, por lo menos, hacía como que ignoraba; mientras que ella, por su lado, como la doncella campestre, era toda modestia, pasividad y agradecimiento: llegando hasta el extremo de remedar la rusticidad con ocasionales fatigas y aturdimientos. Strether calificaba aquellos ejercicios, para sí e incluso para ella, como un feliz interludio; síntoma de lo cual fue que los dos amigos no dijeron ni una sola palabra, mientras duró aquello, a propósito del tema de que habían hablado hasta la saciedad. El hombre declaró el estado de saciedad al comienzo y la mujer captó en el acto la indirecta, tan dócil en esto y en todo como la sobrina obediente y perspicaz. No le dijo él nada, sin embargo, de su última aventura, pues aventura se le figuraba; puso a un lado temporalmente todo el asunto y centró su interés en el hermoso consentimiento femenino. Y la mujer no preguntaba: ella, que durante tanto tiempo había parecido la encarnación de la pregunta; se confiaba a él con una inteligencia de la que la callada y simple galanura habría sido expresión suficiente. Sabía ella que la circunstancia del hombre había dado otro paso al frente: del que él no era ignorante; pero se decía que, fuera lo que fuese lo que le había ocurrido, quedaba a la sombra de lo que le ocurría a ella. Esto —aunque a un alma liberal no habría parecido mucho— constituía el principal interés y ella lo acogió como una nueva muestra de su franqueza, midiéndolo en todo momento con la medida de su serio silencio de aceptación. Afectado tan a menudo por ella en otras ocasiones, el hombre se sentía, por su lado también, afectado nuevamente; tanto más cuanto que, no obstante sabedor de la raíz sustentadora de su humor, no podía serlo por igual de la raíz del de ella. Es decir, sabía, en cierto modo —sabía con superficialidad y resignación—, lo que él mismo maquinaba; mientras que se sentía desorientado ante lo que llamaba para sí cálculos de María. Lo único que precisaba era que ella lo considerase apto para lo que estaban haciendo y aún harían mucho.más si la calificación de la aptitud daba para tanto; la frescura fundamental de una relación tan sencilla era una ducha fría para las heridas producidas por las otras. Estas otras se le figuraban en aquel momento terriblemente compleas; estaban erizadas de espinas, espinas sin cuento y de antemano, espinas que se hundían y causaban sangre; hecho que proporcionó a una hora pasada con su actual amiga en un *bateau-mouche o* a la sombra vespertina de los Campos Elíseos algo del inocente placer de tocar el marfil tallado. Su relación personal con Chad —desde el momento en que comprendiera su punto de vista— había sido de las más sencillas; sin embargo también ésta le pareció erizada de espinas cuando hubieron transcurrido un tercero y cuarto días en blanco. Al final, sin embargo, fue como si su interés por tales apreciaciones hubiera decaído; pues transcurrió un quinto día en blanco y dejó de preguntar y de preocuparse.

Adoptaban en su imaginación, la señorita Gostrey y él, la imagen de los niños perdidos en el bosque; podían confiar en que los misericordiosos elementos les dejarían seguir en paz. El había sido muy pródigo, bien lo sabía, en punto a aplazamientos; pero sólo tenía que introducirse en el propio pulso para advertir su delicada atracción. Le gustaba repetirse que podía haber estado a punto de morirse: de morirse con

resignación; la escena se cargaba entonces de un profundo silencio de velatorio y un encanto melancólico. Esto significaba el aplazamiento de todo lo demás... lo que contribuía al sereno intervalo de vida; y especialmente los aplazamientos del conocimiento futuro... a no ser, claro está, que el conocimiento futuro fuera a ser ni más ni menos que la extinción. Le observaba, el conocimiento, a lomos de mucha experiencia circunstancial, a través de las cuevas de Kubla Khan. Estaba en realidad al final de todo; no se había mezclado con lo que él había hecho; su apreciación final de lo que él había hecho —apreciación en el lugar mismo— vendría con la mayor virulencia. El lugar, así tomado, era naturalmente Woollett y él iba a ver, en el mejor de los casos, lo que Woollett sería después de haberse transformado todo para él. ¿No daría cuenta *aquella* revelación del final de su trabajo? Bien, el final del verano lo diría; su incertidumbre tenía, mientras tanto, exactamente la dulzura de la demora inútil; y él contaba al respecto, conviene decirlo, con otros pasatiempos distintos de la compañía de María... muchos entretenimientos dispersos en que su ocio se venía abajo salvo en un detalle. Se arrimaba a buen puerto, con el mar a sus espaldas, y era sólo cuestión de ganar la playa; tenía un problema pendiente, sin embargo, mientras se apoyaba en el casco de su embarcación, y era liberarse un poco de la obsesión de que estaba prolongando el tiempo que pasaba con la señorita Gostrey. Era un problema propio, pero sólo podía resolverlo viendo otra vez a Chad; era, a decir verdad, su principal razón para querer ver a Chad. Después de esto ya no tendría importancia: sería un fantasma que ciertas palabras devolverían fácilmente al descanso. Sólo que el joven tenía que estar allí para oír las palabras. Una vez que se hubieran escuchado yà no tendría nada pendiente; esto es, nada en relación con este negocio particular. No importaría entonces, ni siquiera ante sí mismo, que pudiera haber sido culpable de hablar a *causa* de lo que había perdido. Tal era el refinamiento de su supremo escrúpulo: no quería tomar en consideración lo que había perdido. No quería hacer nada porque hubiera perdido algo más, porque estuviera dolido o contristado o en la miseria, porque hubiera sido maltratado o estuviera desesperado; quería hacerlo todo porque se sentía lúcido y sereno y en la misma medida respecto de todos los puntos esenciales que siempre. Fue así como, mientras prácticamente esperaba a Chad, siguió expresándolo en silencio. «Te han despedido, compañero; pero ¿qué tiene que ver eso?» La idea de la venganza le resultaba intolerable.

Estas sombras no eran, sin duda, sino la iridiscencia de su ocio y en aquel momento se habían dispersado ante la nueva luz de María. Tenía algo nuevo que decirle antes de que terminase la semana en curso y prácticamente se lo dijo en cuanto apareció el hombre por la noche. No había visto a la mujer en todo el día, pero había planeado presentarse en el momento oportuno para pedirle que cenase con él fuera. Pero entonces se había puesto a llover, de modo que, desconcertado, cambió de idea; cenó solo en casa, con su poco de desgana y su poco de estupidez, y luego fue a buscarla para compensar su derrota. No tardó ni un minuto en percatarse de que había ocurrido algo; estaba de tal modo en la atmósfera de la preciosa salita que no tenía sino que hacer una alusión. Suavemente iluminada, todo el color del lugar, con sus vagos matices, estaba en fría fusión: efecto que hizo que el visitante quedase un tanto sorprendido. Fue como si al hacerlo hubiera advertido una reciente presencia: apercepción que la anfitriona adivinó a su vez. Ni siquiera fue necesario que dijera:

—Sí, ha estado aquí ella y esta vez la he recibido. —Un minuto más tarde añadía—: Pues no había, si mal no le entendí, ningún motivo...

—¿Para no admitirla?

—No... si ha hecho usted lo que tenía que hacer.

—Lo he hecho hasta tal extremo —dijo Strether— que no necesita usted temer que el efecto, o su apariencia, pese sobre nosotros. Entre nosotros no hay nada más que lo que usted y yo hemos comentado, y ni un centímetro de espacio para nada más. Por lo tanto se ha limitado usted a ser maravillosa con nosotros, como siempre, aunque ahora, sin duda, si ha hablado con usted, más con nostros que antes. Por supuesto que si vino —añadió— fue para hablar con usted.

—Fue para hablar conmigo —replicó María; con lo que el hombre estuvo seguro de que la mujer sabía prácticamente lo que él no le había contado todavía. Estaba seguro incluso de que estaba en posesión de cosas que él no habría podido contar; pues la conciencia de las mismas brillaba en la cara femenina junto con un dejo de tristeza que evidenciaba el despeje de todas las incertidumbres. Se le ocurrió con mayor convicción que desde el principio había estado ella en posesión de un conocimiento que no creía hubiera de tener el hombre, un conocimiento cuya rápida adquisición podía afectarle. No era inconcebible que dicha afección se tradujera en la pérdida de la independencia masculina y en un cambio de actitud: en otras palabras, una reacción en favor de los principios de Woollett. Había prefigurado ella la posibilidad de una conmoción que enviara al hombre de rebote con la señora Newsome. El hombre, cierto, no había manifestado, tras todas aquellas semanas, ningún síntoma de haberla sufrido, pero la posibilidad había estado más o menos en el aire. Lo que María, en consecuencia, había tenido que comprender era que la conmoción había mejorado y que él, en cualquier caso, no había sido víctima de rebote alguno. Había

resuelto, sin más, una cuestión largo tiempo pendiente con la señora Newsome, pero a consecuencia de la misma no se había dado ninguna reaproximación a la mujer. Mme. de Vionnet, con su visita, había acercado la antorcha a tales verdades y lo que en aquel momento permanecía en el rostro de la pobre María era la, en cierto modo, luz humeante de la escena habida entre ambas mujeres. Si la luz, sin embargo, no era, como hemos apuntado, el resplandor de la alegría, los motivos quizá los distinguiera Strether incluso a través del desdibujado contorno que en ellos producía su natural modestia. La mujer se había contenido durante meses; no se había entrometido en ninguna circunstancia (éstas habían abundado) que pudiera redundar en beneficio propio. Había vuelto la espalda a la fantasiosa especulación de que la ruptura con la señora Newsome, las pérdidas del amigo común (el compromiso, el trato mismo, roto y sin posibilidad de reparación) podían revertir en su provecho, y, para evitar el fomento de tales casos, se entregaba, en privado, a apasionados momentos, notables por su honradez. No podía, por tanto, sino advertir que, aunque, al final de todo, los hechos en cuestión habían acabado por confirmarse, su base para lo que podría llamarse interesada exultación seguía estando sin definir del todo. Strether podía haber adivinado con facilidad que la mujer se había preguntado, en las horas en que no había hecho sino esperar, si seguiría habiendo o no para ella un retazo de incertidumbre. Apresurémonos a añadir, sin embargo, que lo que él dedujo al principio en aquella ocasión se lo guardó al principio también para sí. Sólo se preguntaba a qué habría ido en particular Mme. de Vionnet; y en cuanto a esto, su compañera estaba preparada.

—Quería tener noticias del señor Newsome, a quien al parecer no ha visto desde hace días.

—¿Luego no ha vuelto a marcharse con él?

—Al parecer —respondió María—, ella pensaba que se había ido con *usted.*

—¿Y no le dijo que yo no sé nada de él?

La mujer negó con la cabeza con condescendencia.

—Yo no sabía nada de lo que usted sabía. Sólo pude decirle que se lo preguntaría.

—Le diré en tal caso que no le he visto desde hace una semana... Y por supuesto me ha sorprendido. —Su sorpresa parecía confirmada ya, pero añadió—: Sin embargo, tal vez pueda averiguar su paradero. ¿No advirtió —preguntó— si nuestra amiga estaba nerviosa?

—Siempre está nerviosa.

—¿Después de todo lo que he hecho por ella? —Y sufrió uno de sus últimos brotes de su leve risa ocasional—. ¡Pensar que era esto lo que yo quena evitar!

La mujer comprendió, pero para replicar en el acto.

—¿No considera usted entonces que está seguro?

—Iba a preguntarle a usted qué opinión le merece, en este sentido, Mme. de Vionnet.

La mujer le dirigió una breve mirada.

—¿Qué mujer está segura? Ella me contó —añadió, y acaso a instancias de aquel nexo— el extraordinario encuentro en el campo. Después de eso, *à quoi se fier?*

—Fue, en tanto que accidente, en el capítulo de lo probable y lo improbable —admitió Strether—, monstruosamente asombroso. Sin embargo, sin embargo...

—¿Sin embargo a ella no le importa?

—A ella no le importa nada.

—Bueno, en tal caso, como a usted tampoco, olvidémonos de lo demás.

El hombre pareció estar de acuerdo con ella, pero tenía sus reservas.

—Lo que me preocupa es la desaparición de Chad.

—Oh, ya le hará usted volver. Pero ahora ya sabe —dijo ella— por qué fui a Mentone. —El hombre le había dado tiempo suficiente para que comprendiera que había hecho las debidas conexiones, pero estaba en la naturaleza de la mujer el deseo de una mayor claridad—. No quiero que me lo pregunte.

—¿Que le pregunte...?

—Lo que usted, hace una semana, iba por fin a comprender por sí mismo. No quiero mentir por ella. Creo que sería excesivo para mí. Por supuesto, siempre se espera que lo haga un hombre... es decir, que un hombre lo haga por una mujer; pero no que una mujer lo haga por otra; a menos, claro está, que se base en el principio del donde las dan las toman y sea una manera indirecta de protegerse a sí misma. Yo no necesito protección, por eso me tomé la libertad de «acobardarle» a usted: sencillamente para eludir su tanteo. La responsabilidad me parecía excesiva. Gané tiempo y cuando estuve de vuelta la necesidad del tanteo había desaparecido.

Strether recomponía los hechos con serenidad.

—Sí; cuando volvió usted, el pequeño Bilham me había enseñado lo que se espera de un caballero. El pequeño Bilham había mentido como uno de ellos.

—¿Y como qué me creyó usted?

—Bueno —dijo Strether—, fue una mentira técnica... él calificó el vínculo de virtuoso. Era un punto de

vista del que se habría podido decir mucho... y la virtud se me antojó una enormidad. Había, desde luego, cantidades inmensas. Recibí una buena andanada y aún no la he despachado del todo.

—Lo que yo creo —replicó María— es que usted disfraza hasta la virtud. Fue usted maravilloso y extraordinario, como he tenido el honor de decirle en otra ocasión; pero, si de veras quiere saberlo —confesó la mujer con tristeza—, nunca supe qué terreno pisaba usted. Hubo momentos —explicó— en que usted me pareció un cínico redomado; y otros aún en que se me antojó usted lo más ambiguo del mundo.

Su amigo meditaba.

—Tuve fases. Sufría ventoleras.

—Sí, pero las cosas necesitan tener una base.

—Una base precisamente me pareció que aportaba la belleza de nuestra amiga.

—¿Su belleza humana?

—Bueno, su belleza en todos los sentidos. La impresión que ella produce. Posee tanta variedad y sin embargo tanta armonía.

La mujer juzgó al hombre con una de sus profundas recaídas en la condescendencia: recaídas que no guardaban la menor proporción con la irritación que arrastraban.

—Es usted muy generoso.

—Y a usted le choca todo demasiado —dijo él de buen humor—; pero éste es el terreno que yo pisaba.

—Si se refiere usted —prosiguió ella— que ella le pareció, desde el principio, la mujer más encantadora del mundo, la cosa es bien sencilla. Sólo que fue una base extraña.

—¿Para lo que construí encima?

—¡Para lo que no construyó!

—Bueno, no se trató de una magnitud concreta. Para mí tenía, y tiene aún, ciertos elementos que no pueden por menos de extrañar. Que sea mayor que él, su diferencia en cuanto a mundo, tradiciones, relaciones; sus oportunidades, cualidades y modelos de conducta distintos.

La amiga escuchaba con respeto la enumeración de las diferencias; pero dio cuenta de todas al instante.

—Esas cosas no significan nada cuando una mujer sufre un flechazo. Y ella sufrió un flechazo.

Strether, por su lado, hizo justicia a la observación.

—Oh, desde luego que había sufrido un flechazo. Este flechazo era nuestra gran preocupación; era el punto central de nuestra historia. Pero de algún modo no podía imaginármela herida en el polvo. ¡Y menos a causa de nuestro pobre Chad!

—Pero ¿no era su pobre Chad precisamente su milagro de usted?

Strether lo admitió.

—Por supuesto, yo me movía entre milagros. Todo era fantasmagórico. Pero el caso es que en un buen porcentaje no era asunto mío... tal como yo veía mis asuntos. Ni siquiera lo es ahora.

Su compañera se alejó ante aquello y acaso porque se temía que la filosofía masculina no pudiera atraerla mucho personalmente.

—Me gustaría que *ella* le oyera.

—¿La señora Newsome?

—No, la señora Newsome no; puesto que me pareció oírle decir que ya no tenía importancia lo que la señora Newsome pudiera saber. ¿No lo ha oído todo?

—Prácticamente sí. —Meditó un momento, pero continuó—. ¿Le gustaría que Mme. de Vionnet me oyera?

—Mme. de Vionnet. —La mujer estaba otra vez a su altura—. Ella opina lo contrario de lo que usted dice. Que ahora la considera usted de modo diferente.

El hombre no hizo sino ver la escena que las dos mujeres, puestas la una al lado de la otra, parecían ofrecerle.

—Ella podía haber sabido...

—¿Podía haber sabido que no? —preguntó la señorita Gostrey, cuando el hombre quedó en suspenso—. Ella estaba segura de que usted había emitido su juicio al principio —continuó como el hombre no dijera nada—; lo dio por sentado, cuando menos, como cualquier otra mujer en su situación habría hecho. ¿Qué otra cosa quería usted que pensara? Pero después cambió de idea; estaba segura de que usted creía...

—¿Sí? —preguntó el hombre con curiosidad.

—Bueno, en sus sublimes cualidades. Y ha seguido creyéndoselo, según he averiguado, hasta que el accidente del otro día le abrió a usted los ojos. Pues que se abrieron...

—¿No le ha pasado desapercibido? —prosiguió el hombre en su lugar—. No —susurró—. Entiendo que tiene que haberle gustado más lo otro.

—Luego pensaba usted lo otro. ¡Ah, vamos! Sin embargo, si usted la sigue considerando la mujer más encantadora del mundo, estamos en las mismas. Y si usted quiere que yo le diga a ella que aún la considera

así... —La señorita Gostrey, en pocas palabras, ofrecía sus servicios hasta el final.

Era una oferta que el hombre podía calibrar; pero ya estaba decidido.

—Ella sabe muy bien cómo la considero

—No con el favor suficiente, según dijo ella, para querer verla otra vez. Me dijo que usted se había despedido de ella definitivamente. Que usted ha roto con ella toda relación. —En efecto.

María hizo una pausa; luego habló como si se dirigiera a la conciencia.

—Ella no habría roto con usted. Sabe que le ha perdido... a pesar de que habría podido tratarle mejor.

—¡Oh, ha sido muy buena conmigo! —dijo Strether riendo.

—Ella opina que usted y ella, en cualquier caso, habrían podido ser amigos.

—Pudimos serlo, cierto. Por eso precisamente —continuó sin dejar de reír— tengo que irme.

Fue como si María hubiera llegado ya a la convicción, al oír aquello, de que había hecho lo que había podido por cada cual. Pero se le había ocurrido algo.

—¿He de contarle esto a ella?

—No. No le cuente nada.

—Muy bien. —A lo que añadió, un segundo después—: ¡Pobre criatura!

Su amigo se extrañó; entonces, con las cejas enarcadas:

—¿Yo?

—Oh, no. Marie.

El hombre admitió la rectificación, pero seguía haciéndose preguntas.

—¿Tan preocupada está por ella?

Aquello hizo pensar un momento a la mujer: le hizo incluso hablar con una sonrisa. Pero no se echó atrás.

—¡Estoy preocupada por todos nosotros!

III

No iba a retardar más el restablecimiento de la comunicación con Chad y había hablado con la señorita Gostrey de esta intención al enterarse por ella de la ausencia del joven. No fue, por otro lado, la seguridad recibida lo que le espoleaba con exclusividad; era también la necesidad de que su conducta casara con otra afirmación hecha: el motivo que había dicho a la mujer era el que más le impelía a marcharse. Si iba a marcharse a causa de las relaciones que implicaría la estancia, una actitud fría al respecto podía parecer amanerada a la luz de la demora. Tenía que hacer ambas cosas; tenía que ver a Chad, pero debía marcharse. Cuanto más pensaba en el primero de estos deberes, más advertía la insistencia del segundo. Sentía ambas instancias con igual intensidad mientras permanecía sentado ante un café en que se había detenido al salir del entresuelo de María. La lluvia que le había echado a perder la velada nocturna con ella había cesado; pues seguía pensando que se le había echado a perder la noche: aunque no podía haber sido totalmente a causa de la lluvia. Era ya tarde cuando abandonó el café, aunque no demasiado tarde; no podía, en cualquier caso, irse directamente a la cama, de modo que pasearía, más bien dando un rodeo, por el Boulevard Malesherbes, camino de su casa. Siempre se acordaba de la pequeña circunstancia que le había espoleado al principio: la casualidad de la aparición del pequeño Bilham en el balcón del místico troisième cuando iba a hacer su primera visita y el efecto que tuvo en su curiosidad. Recordaba su observación, su espera y la apercepción, de parte del joven desconocido, que había palpitado con tanta franqueza en la atmósfera y que le había hecho subir... cosas que habían favorecido sus primeros pasos. Había tenido ocasión, unas cuantas veces, de pasar ante la casa sin entrar; pero nunca había pasado por allí sin experimentar lo que el lugar y la circunstancia le habían hecho sentir. Se detuvo brevemente aquella noche, cuando tuvo la casa a la vista; y fue como si aquel último día fuera extraña reproducción del primero. Las ventanas del piso de Chad estaban abiertas al balcón: y de ellas, dos estaban iluminadas, y una persona había hecho aparición y adoptado la actitud del pequeño Bilham, una persona cuyo cigarrillo encendido alcanzaba a ver, inclinada sobre la barandilla y mirándole a él. Aquello no significó, sin embargo, ninguna reaparición del joven amigo; quedó claro en seguida, en medio de la relativa oscuridad, que la persona en cuestión tenía la complexión más sólida de Chad; así que fue la atención de Chad lo que, tras adelantarse hasta la calzada y hacer una seña, atrajo fácilmente: y fue la voz de Chad la que, con prontitud y al parecer con alegría, le dijo que subiese.

Que el joven estuviera en lugar tan visible y en aquella actitud, le confirmaba en cierto modo que, como María Gostrey había informado, había estado ausente y en silencio; y nuestro amigo tragaba el aire a bocanadas en cada descansillo —el ascensor, a aquellas horas, ya no funcionaba— ante las implicaciones del hecho. Había estado, durante una semana, totalmente alejado, alejado en el espacio y de toda compañía;

pero estaba más de vuelta que nunca y la actitud en que Strether le había sorprendido era algo más que un regreso: era, de manera manifiesta, una rendición consciente. Había vuelto hacía sólo una hora, de Londres, de Lucerna, de Hamburgo, no importaba de dónde, aunque a la cábala del visitante, mientras seguía subiendo éste las escaleras, le habría gustado saberlo; tras un baño, unas palabras con Baptiste y una cena de sustanciosos fiambres franceses, que aún podían verse en el cerco luminoso de la lámpara, bonita y ultraparisiense, había salido a tomar el fresco y a fumar un cigarrillo, y estaba ocupado, en el momento de aparecer Strether, en lo que podía llamarse reanudación de su vida. ¡Su vida, su vida! Strether hizo una nueva pausa, ya en el último descansillo, ante aquella impresión final y más bien desalentada de lo que la vida de Chad le estaba causando. Le arrastraba, a horas extrañas, por las escaleras de personajes acomodados; le sacaba de la cama después de jornadas calurosas y llenas de fatigas; le transformaba hasta lo irreconocible las cualidades de sencillez, comodidad y uniformidad que de muy antiguo había considerado propias de su vida. ¿Por qué tenía que preocuparle que Chad se fortificase en la agradable práctica de fumar en los balcones, cenara a base de fiambres, considerase reafirmada su particular situación y encontrase las confirmaciones en las comparaciones y los contrastes? No había para esta pregunta otra respuesta que la seguridad de que el joven seguía prácticamente comprometido: una seguridad que tal vez fuera mayor que nunca. Aquello le hizo sentirse viejo y devolvería el billete de tren —sintiéndose, sin duda, más viejo— al día siguiente; pero mientras tanto había subido cuatro pisos, entresuelo incluido, a medianoche, sin ascensor, y a causa de aquella vida que Chad llevaba. El joven, que le había oído llegar, como había enviado a la cama a Baptiste, estaba ya en la puerta; de modo que Strether tuvo ante sí, con visibilidad remozada, la causa por la que peleaba e incluso, tras haber alcanzado por fin el troisième, jadeaba un poco.

Chad le dispensó, como siempre, una recepción en que lo cordial y lo formal —hasta donde lo formal era lo respetuososse combinaron de maravilla; y una vez que hubo expresado la esperanza de que Strether le permitiría alojarle aquella noche, el segundo estuvo en posesión de la clave, como habría podido decirse, de lo que había ocurrido en aquellos últimos días. Si se había considerado viejo, Chad, al verle, le consideró más viejo sin duda; quería alojarle aquella noche sólo porque era un anciano y estaba cansado. Nunca se diría que el inquilino de aquellas dependencias no había sido agradable con él; un inquilino que, si en aquel momento podía cuidarle, probablemente estaba dispuesto para no cejar en el empeño. Nuestro amigo tenía de hecho la impresión de que, sin que hiciera falta mucho valor, Chad le propondría cuidarle indefinidamente; una impresión a cuyo amor vivía una de sus propias posibilidades. Mme. de Vionnet quería que se quedase: ¿por qué no aceptarlo cordialmente? Podía instalarse durante lo que le quedaba de vida en la habitación de los huéspedes del joven y vivir dicho período a costa de su joven amigo; no se encontraría expresión más lógica del paso por el que habría optado. A decir verdad hubo un instante —y bien extraño— durante el que se le ocurrió pensar que la forma en que se comportaba, la única forma en que podía comportarse, era del todo incoherente. La señal de que la inspiración que había obedecido era realmente consistente sería que —a falta, siempre, de otras alternativas— fomentaría la buena causa montando la guardia ante ella. Tales cosas, en el curso de los primeros minutos, vinieron a ocurrírsele; pero se desembarazó de ellas prácticamente en cuanto hubo sacado a relucir lo que le había llevado allí. Había ido a despedirse, aunque esto era sólo una parte; de modo que desde el momento en que Chad aceptó la despedida el tema de una afirmación más ideal dio paso a otras cosas. No se callaría sus restantes preocupaciones.

—Serías un animal, serías culpable de la peor infamia si la abandonaras alguna vez.

Esto, dicho en hora tan solemne, dicho en un lugar pletórico de la influencia femenina, era el resumen de sus restantes preocupaciones; y cuando se oyó decirlo a sí mismo supo que en ninguna ocasión anterior a la presente había entregado en realidad su mensaje. Lo que situó la presente visita inmediatamente en un terreno sólido y el efecto de esto le permitió jugar con lo que hemos llamado la clave. Chad no mostraba la menor señal de turbación, pero se sentía afectado después del encuentro en el campo; tenía temores y dudas en lo tocante a su tranquilidad. Estaba preocupado, para el caso, únicamente *por* él y sin duda se había alejado unos días para serenarse. Al verle ahora cansado, no había tenido reparo, con la buena disposición que le caracterizaba, en recibirle, y lo que Strether dedujo en consecuencia fue que no dejaría de proporcionarle, hasta el fin, todo tipo de seguridades. No se daría entre ambos otra cosa mientras el visitante se quedase; así que, lejos de tener que volver a los viejos temas, descubría que su anfitrión estaba bastante dispuesto a admitirlo todo. Y nunca diría con suficiente energía que sería un animal.

—Es cierto. Espero que me crea si le digo que opino lo mismo.

—Quiero —dijo Strether— que lo consideres mi última palabra al respecto. No puedo decir más, ya lo sabes; y no comprendo qué más puedo hacer en este sentido.

Chad tomó aquello, sin mucha perspicacia, por una alusión directa.

—¿La ha visto?

—Oh, sí: para decirle adiós. Y si había dudado de la verdad de lo que te digo...

—¿Ella le ha aclarado las dudas? —Chad comprendió... ¡naturalmente que comprendió! Incluso guardó unos minutos de silencio. Pero prosiguió—. Debe de haber estado maravillosa.

—Lo estuvo —admitió Strether con candidez: todo lo cual prácticamente era una referencia a la situación creada por el accidente de la semana anterior.

Parecieron recordarlo durante unos instantes y esto vino a reflejarse más si cabe en lo que el joven dijo a continuación.

—En realidad no sé lo que ha pensado usted todo este tiempo; jamás lo he sabido, pues todo, respecto de usted, parecía imposible. Pero, naturalmente, naturalmente... —Sin confusiones, sin otra cosa que complacencia, pareció derrumbarse y recuperarse acto seguido—. A fin de cuentas, compréndalo, yo hablé con usted, al principio, sólo como tenía que hablar. No hay más que una forma, ¿no cree?, en este tipo de asuntos. Sin embargo —sonrió con postrera filosofía—, comprendo que es justo.

Strether le miró a los ojos mientras sus pensamientos se ramificaban. ¿Qué le hacía en aquel momento, a las tantas de la noche y después del viaje, tan remozada y sustancialmente joven? Strether lo comprendió al instante: era más joven, otra vez, que Mme. de Vionnet. No dijo ninguna de las cosas que pensaba; dijo, por el contrario, algo bien distinto:

—¿De veras te has ido muy lejos?

—He estado en Inglaterra. —Chad hablaba con calor y rapidez, pero no fue más allá salvo para decir—: A veces hay que desaparecer.

Strether no quería más hechos: sólo quería justificar si era posible, su pregunta.

—Eras muy libre de hacerlo, claro está. No obstante, espero que esta vez no te hayas ido por *mí*.

—¿Por la vergüenza de molestarle demasiado? Querido amigo —dijo Chad riendo—, ¿qué no haría yo por usted?

La desenvuelta respuesta de Strether puso de relieve que se trataba de una circunstancia de la que había ido precisamente a beneficiarse.

—Aun a riesgo de hacer lo que tú, te he estado esperando, bien lo sabes, por un motivo concreto.

Chad lo entendió.

—Oh, sí: para tener de nosotros, de ser posible, una mejor impresión. —Y se quedó aspirando con alegría su absoluta apercepción—. Me satisface saber que no ha sido para menos.

Había una grata ironía en aquellas palabras, que su amigo, preocupado y centrado en lo que le interesaba, no tomó en cuenta.

—Mientras estuvieron aquí me daba la sensación de que me faltaba algo —explicó Strether—, pero ahora sé qué quería.

Se comportaba con la seriedad y distinción de un profesor ante una pizarra y Chad seguía mirándole como un alumno inteligente.

—A usted le habría gustado resolverlo todo.

Strether, durante un momento, no dijo nada; apartó la mirada y ésta fue a perderse, más allá de la ventana, en la oscuridad exterior.

—Sabré por el banco dónde reciben la correspondencia y mi decisión, que pondré por escrito por la mañana y que ellos esperan como mi ultimátum, les llegará en seguida. —La luz del plural del pronombre quedó bien reflejada en la cara del compañero, mientras él seguía con sus explicaciones pedagógicas. Continuó como si hablase para sí mismo—. Por supuesto, antes he de justificar lo que voy a hacer.

—¡Pues lo justifica usted divinamente! —afirmó Chad.

—No se trata de aconsejarte que no te vayas —dijo Strether—, sino de impedirte por completo que llegues siquiera a pensarlo. Permíteme que te lo pida por lo que tengas por más sagrado.

Chad manifestó sorpresa.

—¿Qué le hace pensar que soy capaz...?

—No sólo serías, como te he dicho, un animal: serías —prosiguió su amigo en el mismo tono— un criminal de la peor ralea.

El rostro de Chad adoptó una expresión más circunspecta, como si hubiera concebido una sospecha.

—No sé qué puede haberle hecho pensar que estoy cansa¡do de ella.

Strether no lo sabía tampoco y tales impresiones, para un espíritu sensible, eran siempre demasiado delicadas, demasiado sutiles, para producir allí mismo su propia justificación. Hubo en su sentir, sin embargo, en la misma forma que su anfitrión había aludido a la saciedad como posible motivo, un leve presagio.

—Sé lo mucho que aún puede hacer ella por ti. Aún no lo ha hecho todo. Quédate con ella por lo menos hasta que lo haya hecho.

—¿Y dejarla *entonces?*

Chad seguía sonriendo, pero el efecto de esta sonrisa en Strether fue más bien de aridez.

—No la dejes *antes*. Cuándo obtendrás cuanto puede obtenerse... es algo que no sé —añadió con cierta severidad—. Supongo que ocurrirá cuando tenga que ocurrir. Pero como una mujer así es siempre inagotable, mi único consejo es que no cometas un error con ella. —Chad le dejaba continuar, manifestando la mayor de las deferencias, manifestando quizá también una curiosidad un tanto ingenua, ante aquella perceptible solemnidad—. Me acuerdo de cómo eras antes.

—Un tonto de remate, ¿no?

La respuesta fue tan inmediata como si hubiera pisado un muelle; poseía una generosa predisposición que incluso le hizo parpadear; de modo que se tomó unos momentos para apreciarla.

—En realidad, no habrías justificado el negocio en que me has metido. Tu valor se ha quintuplicado.

—Bueno, en tal caso, ¿no sería suficiente?

Chad se había atrevido a gastar una broma, pero Strether seguía impasible.

—¿Suficiente?

—Para vivir con lo que ya ha atesorado uno. —Tras lo cual, sin embargo, como su amigo no pareciese estimar la broma, el joven cambió de actitud—. Desde luego, no he olvidado en ningún momento, ni de día ni de noche, todo lo que debo a esta mujer. Se lo debo todo. Doy a usted mi palabra de honor —dijo con espontaneidad— que no estoy cansado de ella en modo alguno. —Strether, al oír aquello, se limitó a mirarle: la forma en que el joven se expresaba no dejaba nunca de asombrarle. No quería ofender, aunque podía, a fin de cuentas, causar grandes perjuicios; sin embargo, se refería a estar «cansado» de ella casi como habría dicho que estaba cansado de cenar cordero asado—. Nunca me ha provocado ni un segundo de aburrimiento: nunca ha carecido, como a veces ocurre a las mujeres más inteligentes, de tacto. Nunca ha hecho la menor alusión a su tacto, como suelen hacer muchas; pero siempre lo ha tenido —con lo que ponía el dedo en la llaga— como en estos últimos días. —Y prosiguió escrupulosamente—: Nunca ha significado nada que yo pueda considerar una carga.

Strether guardó silencio durante unos instantes; luego habló con seriedad, con una vuelta a la aridez.

—Oh, si no le hicieras justicia...

—Sería un animal, ¿no?

Strether no dedicó más tiempo a decir lo que sería; aquello, estaba claro, podía llevarles muy lejos. Aunque si no había otra cosa que la repetición, la repetición, por lo menos, no causaba ningún daño.

—Se lo debes todo: mucho más de lo que ella puede deberte nunca a ti. En otras palabras, tienes para con ella un deber que no puedes descuidar; y no veo que haya ningún otro que tenga que anteponerse a este.

Chad le observó con una sonrisa.

—Y usted sabe algo de ese otro deber, ¿no?, pues es usted quien lo ha sacado a colación.

—Sé bastante, hasta donde alcanza mi capacidad. Pero no lo sé todo... no todo desde el momento en que tu hermana ocupó mi puesto.

—Ella no hizo tal —replicó Chad—; Sally ocupó un puesto, cierto, pero jamás, lo comprendí desde el primer momento, el de usted. Nadie, en lo que afecta a nosotros, podría ocupar el suyo. Sería imposible.

—Ah, claro —dijo Strether suspirando—, ya comprendo. Creo que tienes razón. Nadie, supongo, ha sido jamás tan solemne. Es mi sino —añadió con otro suspiro, como si a veces se sintiera hastiado de esta verdad—. Soy así.

Chad pareció considerar brevemente cómo era su amigo; en este sentido habría podido medirle de arriba abajo. Su conclusión vino a favorecer el hecho. La intención benévola, en cualquier caso, no estaba en ninguna otra parte; Chad no dejó de darla a entender, a modo de protesta y promesa, y cogiendo un sombrero del vestíbulo, salió con él, bajaron las escaleras, dándole el brazo para ayudarle y conducirle, tratándole como a un anciano inseguro, hasta que llegaron a la calle, donde lo acompañó, en un corto paseo, hasta la esquina más cercana y luego hasta la siguiente.

—¡No hace falta que me lo diga, no hace falta que me lo diga!

Tal deseaba que comprendiera, mientras echaban a andar. Lo que no hacía falta le dijera Strether no era nada que, al cabo, en aquella separación tan entusiasta, le interesase saber. Pues lo sabía hasta el delirio: de esto no había la menor duda; y comprendía, sabía, prometía; y siguieron demorándose como lo habían hecho durante el paseo hasta el hotel de Strether en la noche de su primer encuentro. Éste, a aquellas alturas, tomaba todo lo que podía; había dado todo lo que podía dar; estaba tan vacío como si hubiera gastado su último céntimo. No hubo sino una cosa respecto de la que, antes de que se separasen, Chad pareció dispuesto a negociar. Strether no tenía que decírselo, como él mismo afirmaba, pero él podía decirse a sí mismo que había recibido noticias del arte de la publicidad. Salió repentinamente con estas palabras mientras Strether se preguntaba si su remozado interés era el que le había llevado, con extraña inconsecuencia, a Londres. Parecía, en cualquier caso, haber meditado bien el asunto y había descubierto

una revelación. La publicidad, enfocada científicamente, representaba en sí misma un gran poder.

—Lo hace todo en realidad.

Estaban frente por frente, bajo el farol callejero, como habían estado la primera noche, y Strether, sin duda, parecía perplejo.

—¿Quieres decir que influye en la venta de los objetos anunciados?

—Sí, influye de manera extraordinaria; a decir verdad, hasta límites insospechados. Quiero decir que es lo lógico cuando uno se para a pensar todo lo que puede hacerse en esta época trepidante. He hecho mis pequeñas averiguaciones. Es un arte como cualquier otro, e infinito como los demás. —Prosiguió como si en ello se contuviera una buena broma... casi como si la cara del compañero le hiciese gracia—. En manos, naturalmente, de un maestro. Ha de estar al cuidado del hombre ideal. Con un individuo así, *c'est un monde!*

Strether le había mirado como si, allí mismo, en la acera, sin el menor aviso, se hubiera puesto a bailar.

—¿Piensas tal vez que, en el caso de que te lo propusieras, serías el hombre ideal?

Chad se había echado hacia atrás la chaqueta e introdujo ambos pulgares en sendos ojales del chaleco; posición en la que el resto de los dedos se movían con ligereza.

—¿No quería usted convertirme en uno cuando llegó aquí?

Strether sufrió un ligero vahído, pero se esforzó por escuchar.

—Oh, sí, y no cabe la menor duda de que, con tus dotes naturales, tendrías mucho en común con él. La publicidad es, por supuesto, en estos días, el secreto de los negocios. Y es posible que, si te pusieras en ello con lo más profundo que hay en ti, consiguieras grandes cosas. La voz de tu madre es lo más profundo que hay en ti y ello dice de su fortaleza.

Los dedos de Chad seguían bailoteando, pero sufrieron una ligera parálisis.

—Ah, ya hemos resuelto el caso de mi madre.

—Eso creía yo. ¿Por qué, entonces, hablas de ello?

—Sólo porque era parte de nuestra antigua conversación. Para volver al comienzo. Mi interés es exclusivamente platónico. En cualquier caso, el hecho está ahí: el hecho de la posibilidad. Me refiero al dinero que hay implicado.

—¡Oh, que el diablo se lleve al dinero! —dijo Strether. Y luego, como la continua sonrisa del joven pareciera adoptar un rictus extraño—. ¿Renunciarías a ella por el dinero que hay en juego?

Chad mantuvo su gesto elegante, así como el resto de su actitud.

—No es usted muy amable. ¿Qué he hecho yo, qué hago sino estar con ella? Lo que ocurre —explicó con buen humores que me gusta «calcular», siempre es agradable para los propios sentimientos, el soborno al que doy el puntapié.

—Si no quiere más que superficie para golpear, entonces el soborno es inmenso.

—Estupendo. ¡Al diablo con él! —Dio su puntapié con fuerza imaginaria y lanzó por el aire el objeto no menos imaginario. Fue por tanto como si hubieran zanjado otra vez la cuestión y volvieran a lo que realmente les interesaba—. Nos veremos mañana, por supuesto.

Pero Strether apenas había pensado en esto; estaba todavía bajo la impresión de haber asistido, no a un puntapié simulado, sino a una irrelevante tarantela o a una jiga.

—Estás inquieto.

—Ah —replicó Chad al separarse—, usted es emocionante.

IV

Tenía, sin embargo, al cabo de dos días, otro informe que hacer. Había enviado a la señorita Gostrey un mensaje temprano para preguntarle si podía verla para desayunar; en consecuencia, al mediodía, ya le esperaba ella a la fresca sombra de su pequeño comedor de aire holandés. Este aposento estaba al fondo de la casa y gozaba de un paisaje que no era sino la parte del antiguo jardín que se había salvado de la destrucción moderna; y aunque había colocado las piernas en más de una ocasión bajo la hospitalaria mesa, pequeña y notablemente brillante, el lugar nunca le había parecido tan consagrado a la charla amena, al encanto íntimo, al orden antiguo, a una pulcritud que casi era augusta. Sentarse allí era, como le había dicho él en otra ocasión, ver la vida reflejada por el tiempo en el peltre idealmente conservado; que en cierto modo revivía, mejoraba la existencia, de tal manera que la mirada quedaba prendada y sosegada. La de Strether sufría este efecto, en cualquier caso, en aquel momento —y más que la última vez—, con el encanto consiguiente, gracias al tablero desprovisto de mantel y orgulloso de su perfecta superficie, gracias a la pequeña y antigua vajilla y cubertería de plata, que conjugaba con las más sustanciales piezas felizmente repartidas por la habitación. Los utensilios de vívida porcelana de Delft, en particular, poseían la dignidad de los retratos de familia; y fue en medio de ellos donde nuestro amigo dijo lo que pensaba con

resignación. Habló incluso con cierto humor filosófico.

—Ya no hay nada que esperar; tengo la sensación de haber trabajado sin descanso. He visto a Chad, que ha estado en Londres y ha vuelto. Dice que soy «emocionante» y a mí, la verdad, me parece que he trastornado a todo el mundo. En cualquier caso a él le puse nervioso: Salta a la vista que está inquieto.

—A mí también me pone usted nerviosa —dijo la señorita Gostrey sonriendo—. Salta a la vista que estoy inquieta.

—Oh, eso fue cuando la conocí. Pero me parece que he podido quitárselo. ¿Qué es esto —preguntó lanzando una mirada a su alrededor—, sino la paz perfecta?

—Desearía de todo corazón —replicó la mujer— hacer lo posible porque sea así. —Y se quedaron mirando, uno a cada lado de la mesa, como si vibraran en el aire cosas que no se dijeran.

Strether, cuando tomó la palabra otra vez, pareció captar algunas.

—No me produciría, éste sería el problema, lo que sin duda produce a usted. No estoy —explicó, echándose atrás en la silla, pero con los ojos puestos en un melón redondo y maduro— en total armonía con lo que me rodea. Usted sí. Para mí es demasiado violento. Para usted no. Me hace sentirme, pues de esto se trata en definitiva, en ridículo. —Luego, saliéndose por la tangente—: ¿Qué ha hecho él en Londres? —preguntó.

—Ah, cualquiera puede ir a Londres —dijo María riendo—. Ya sabe usted que yo lo hice.

Sí... lo recordaba.

—Y me trajo consigo. —El hombre seguía meditando, pero sin pesimismos—. ¿A quién ha traído Chad? Está lleno de ideas. Lo primero que hice esta mañana —añadió— fue escribir a Sarah. Ya estoy en paz. Estoy preparado para lo que quieran.

La mujer daba de lado algunos fragmentos de la conversación en beneficio de otros.

—Cierta persona me dijo el otro día que tiene lo que hace falta para ser un gran hombre de negocios. —Es lógico. De tal palo, tal astilla.

—¡Pero *vaya* palo!

—Desde ese punto de vista, el más apropiado. Pero lo que me preocupa de él —añadió Strether— no es su padre.

—¿Qué es entonces? —El hombre volvió a su desayuno; probó el suculento melón, que la mujer le había partido generosamente; sólo tras haber hecho esto consideró la pregunta femenina. No fue, además, sino para realzar que respondería en seguida. La mujer esperaba, le miraba, le servía y despertaba su buen humor y fue quizás a rastras de esta última idea como recordaría al hombre que nunca le había dicho lo que se producía en Woollett. ¿Recuerda que hablamos de ello en Londres... aquella noche en el teatro? —Antes de que él pudiera decir que sí, sin embargo, ya había cambiado ella de tema. ¿Recordaba tal cosa y cual otra de aquellos primeros días? El se acordaba de todo, comentando con humor incluso cosas que ella afirmaba no recordar, cosas que ella negaba con vehemencia; y centrándose sobre todo en el gran interés de aquella primera época en que ambos sentían la misma curiosidad por la resolución del hombre. Habían supuesto que sería una resolución terrible y maravillosa: pues hay que decir que habían pensado continuamente en ello. Bueno, era indudable que no había sido de otra forma, puesto que le había conducido a la situación presente. Se había decidido, a decir verdad, hasta donde le había sido posible, y ahora tenía que pensar en cómo dar marcha atrás. Descubrió entonces la imagen de su historia reciente; él era como una de las figuras del viejo reloj de Berna. Salían por un lado a la hora que les tocaba, bailaban mientras seguían su curso a los ojos del público, y entraban por el otro lado. También él había bailado durante su. breve trayecto y también a él le aguardaba un modesto habitáculo. Se ofreció entonces, si ella quería saberlo, a decir cuál era el gran producto de Woollett. Constituiría un grandioso comentario a todo. Pero entonces la mujer le detuvo; ella no sólo no tenía el menor deseo de saberlo, sino que no lo sabría de ninguna de las maneras. Había renunciado a los productos de Woollett... a pesar de todo el bien que había obtenido de ellos. No deseaba saber más de ellos y dijo que Mme. de Vionnet, por lo que ella sabía, había vivido sin la información que él quería suministrarle. Ella nunca había consentido en recibirla, aunque la hubiera aceptado, bajo la tensión, de labios de la señora Pocock. Pero era un asunto del que la señora Pocock no había parecido muy dispuesta a hablar y en aquel momento carecía de importancia. A decir verdad no había nada que tuviese importancia para María Gostrey en aquel momento... salvo un punto delicado que sacó a relucir en su momento—. No sé si considera usted una posibilidad que el señor Chad, a fin de cuentas, pueda volver. A mí me parece que para usted existe, más o menos, a juzgar por lo que acaba de decir de él.

Su invitado la había mirado, con amabilidad pero con atención, como si previera lo que iba a seguir a aquello.

—No creo que fuera por el dinero. —Y como ella no pareciera entender—: Quiero decir que romperá con ella...

—¿Romperá con ella?

Strether esperó un momento, con mayor lentitud y deliberación en aquella circunstancia, procurando perfilar aquella última y dulce etapa, rogando a la mujer con sugestivos medios innecesitados de palabras, que tuviera paciencia y comprensión.

—¿Qué iba a preguntarme?

—¿Puede contribuir él a que usted haga las paces?

—¿Con la señora Newsome?

El asentimiento, como si la mujer sintiera algún escrúpulo ante aquel nombre, se reflejó únicamente en su expresión; aunque añadió en seguida:

—¿O es en ella en quien puede influir?

—¿Para que haga las paces conmigo? —La respuesta del hombre llegó al final con un concluyente cabeceo—. Nadie puede hacer nada. Es asunto terminado. Para los dos.

—¿Está usted seguro por lo que a ella respecta? —preguntó María, que dudaba al parecer.

—Oh, sí: ahora sí. Ha ocurrido demasiado. He cambiado para ella.

La mujer comprendió, tomando una profunda bocanada de aire.

—Entiendo. Al igual que ella ha cambiado para usted...

—Bueno —interrumpió el hombre—, ella no. —Y como la señorita Gostrey pareciera otra vez sorprendida—: Es la misma. Es la misma más que nunca. Pero me sucede ahora lo que no me sucedía antes: la *comprendo*.

El hombre hablaba con seriedad, como si tuviera que responder por ello; puesto que tenía que pronunciarse. El efecto de ello fue un tanto solemne, de modo que la mujer se limitó a lanzar un «¡Oh!» Satisfecha y complacida, sin embargo, dio a entender con las siguientes palabras que creía la afirmación del hombre.

—¿Por qué se va entonces?

El hombre apartó su plato, preocupado por otro aspecto de la cuestión; refugiándose, en realidad, en este otro aspecto y sintiéndose tan conmovido que no tardó en ponerse en pie. Pensaba anticipadamente en lo que suponía iba a escuchar de los labios de ella y le habría gustado impedirlo y enfocarlo con toda ternura; sin embargo, ante ello, deseaba más aún ser, aunque con la mayor dulzura, disuasivo y concluyente. Soslayó por el momento la pregunta femenina; le habló un poco más de Chad.

—Me habría sido imposible ser más insistente que él anoche en lo tocante a la infamia que representaría no seguir con ella.

Bueno, también en esto podía estar de acuerdo con María.

—¿Es la palabra que usted utilizó? ¿«Infamia»?

—¡Oh, sí! Le describí con detalle lo vil que sería y él estuvo de acuerdo conmigo.

—¿No es entonces como si usted lo hubiera puesto entre la espada y la pared?

—Más o menos... Le dije que le maldeciría.

—Oh —exclamó sonriendo—, ha hecho usted eso. —Y tras haber pensado un momento—: Después de eso no puede usted declararse... —Sin embargo, observó atentamente la cara del hombre.

—¿Declararme otra vez a la señora Newsome?

La mujer volvió a titubear, pero se repuso.

—Nunca he creído que usted se declarase. Siempre supuse que fue ella y, en este sentido, lo entiendo. Lo que quiero decir —explicó— es que con un espíritu así, ¡el espíritu de las maldiciones!, su infracción está más que reparada. Ella sólo tiene que saber lo que usted ha hecho para que no le deje mover ni un dedo nunca más.

—He hecho —dijo Strether— lo que he podido: no se puede hacer más. El jura su devoción y su horror. Pero no estoy seguro de haberle salvado. Él jura demasiado. Me preguntó que cómo se podía pensar siquiera que él estuviera cansado. Pero tiene toda una vida por delante.

María comprendió lo que el hombre quería decir.

—Está hecho para agradar.

—Y es nuestra amiga quien lo ha hecho así. —Strether se percató de la extraña ironía.

—¡Entonces casi no es culpa suya!

—En cualquier caso es su peligro. Quiero decir —dijo Strether— el de ella. Pero ella lo sabe.

—Sí, lo sabe. ¿Y no pensaba usted —preguntó María Gostrey— — que había otra mujer en Londres?

—Sí. No. Es decir, yo no pienso nada. Me da miedo pensar. He terminado con todo. —Y le tendió la mano—. Adiós.

Lo que hizo que la mujer volviese a una pregunta no contestada.

—¿Por qué se va?

—No lo sé. Siempre saldrá alguna cosa.

—Será muy distinto —dijo la mujer, mientras le estrechaba la mano.

—Muy distinto, sin duda. Pero ya veré qué puedo hacer.

—¿Hará quizá algo tan extraordinario...?-como si recordase lo que la señora Newsome había hecho, fue lo único que pudo decir la mujer.

Pero él había comprendido.

—¿Tan extraordinario como este lugar en este momento? ¿Tan extraordinario como todo lo que usted sabe hacer? —El hombre había tardado un poco en responder, pues, a decir verdad, lo que veía en la oferta femenina, oferta de exquisitos servicios, de agradables cuidados, durante el resto de sus días, bien podía haberle tentado. Se sintió rodeado por ello, cobijado cálidamente por ello, y allí quedó, con toda su entereza, con su variado sentido de la selección. Y lo que regía la selección era la belleza y el conocimiento. Era inquietante, casi estúpido, no saber apreciar, al parecer, tales cosas; sin embargo, aunque constituían la oportunidad del hombre, la constituyeron sólo durante un momento. Ella, además, lo comprendería: ella siempre lo comprendía.

Es posible que fuera así, pero, mientras tanto, ella iba a continuar.

—Ya sabe usted que no hay nada que yo no hiciera por usted.

—Sí... lo sé.

—Nada —repitió ella— en el mundo.

—Lo sé. Lo sé. Pero debo irme de todos modos. —Se había decidido al final—. Para ser justo.

—¿Para ser justo?

La mujer lo había repetido con vaga desaprobación, pero él se dio cuenta de que la mujer comprendía ya.

—Se trata de mi propia lógica. No haber conseguido absolutamente nada de todo este asunto.

La mujer meditaba.

—Pero, con su maravillosa experiencia, podrá conseguir mucho.

—Mucho —convino él—. Pero nada como *usted.* Es usted quien me hace sentirme equivocado.

Honradamente, la mujer no podía fingir que no se daba cuenta. Sin embargo, fingió un poco.

—Pero ¿por qué tiene que ser usted tan espantosamente justo?

El hombre meditó y lo manifestó llanamente.

—Si debo irme, así es como usted tendría que ser la primera en querer que yo fuera. Y no puedo hacer otra cosa.

Así, pues, es como tenía que aceptarlo, aunque todavía con una débil protesta.

—No es tanto que usted sea «justo» como su terrible perspicacia para lo que le hace ser así.

—Oh, pero usted no carece de picardía. Y usted no puede resistírseme cuando se lo saco a relucir.

La mujer suspiró por fin con aire tragicómico.

—Es cierto: no puedo resistirme a usted.

—¡Pues así es todo! —dijo Strether.

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notes

Notas a pie de página

[1] «Pasamos por Urruña, en cuya iglesia hay un reloj en la fachada, que tiene a su alrededor, escrita con letras negras, esta fúnebre inscripción: *Vulnerant omnes, ultima necat.* Es verdad, melancólica leyenda: todas las horas nos hieren con la punta de una aguja parecida a la tuya y cada vuelta en la esfera nos lleva a lo desconocido», Teófilo Gautier, *Viaje por España,* cap. II *(N. del T.)*

[2] Juego de palabras: *tooth* significa tanto púa como diente. (Nota del Traductor.)

[3] La edición que seguimos en esta traducción, preparada por R. W. Stallman, sitúa una nota a pie de página en este pasaje, informando que otras ediciones dicen *his remarks* en lugar de *her remarks,* esto es, «observa¬ciones del hombre» en lugar de «observaciones de la mujer». La edición Penguin, que cotejamos en los fragmentos de sintaxis confusa (y no son escasos), dice asimismo *her.* Juzgue el lector la conveniencia de uno u otro posesivo. *(N. del T.)*

[4] *Sensations;* pero *flowers* en la ed. Penguin. Aceptada la inexistencia de errata, la elección de Penguin permite suponer, en virtud de acepciones ya desusadas o simplemente familiares, que las *sensations* en cuestión se refieren a las mujeres. *(N. del T.)*

[5] *Plummet* en la Ed. Penguin, esto es, «plomada». Adviértase que, al igual que en la variante observada más arriba, James corrigió las galeradas de 1903 con tendencia a eliminar las alusiones a objetos concretos. *(N. del T.)*

[6] *Portuguese* en la ed. que seguimos; la ed. Penguin, que reproduce un texto con ligeras variantes, dice *Portugee.* Según el *Dictionary of historical slang,* de Eric Partridge, este segundo vocablo alude, en la jerga marinera, a cualquier extranjero que no sea francés. *(N. del T.)*

[7] «They covered our friend...» en la ed. de Stallman; *«his sense of the thing in question covered our friend...»* en la ed. Penguin. Es evidente que se refiere a los atributos de Chad recién mencionados. *(N. del T.)*

[8] * La ed. Penguin añade:

«—¿Con ella?

«—Con ella.

«—¿Y qué es lo que las hace tan buenas?*» (N. del T.)*

[9] Tanto esta frase como la anterior tienen en el original una sintaxis extraña que aquí se adapta a la legibilidad. *(N. del T.)*

[10] *Victoria* en el original; se refiere al coche de caballos de dos asientos que puso de moda la reina inglesa del mismo nombre. *(N. del T.)*

[11] En la edición de Stallman falta, después de esta frase, la presumible réplica de Mme. de Vionnet. La ed. Penguin añade, en efecto:

«—Y tanto que lo comprende.»

La «exclamación de triunfo» se convertiría, en tal caso, sencillamente en su «triunfo» a secas. *(N. del T.)*

[12] Añade la ed. Penguin: «de manera indirecta, sin duda, pero no menos tranquilizadora» (N. *del T.)*

[13] Varieties en el original. (N. del T.)

[14] *To struggle along* en la ed. que seguimos; en la ed. Penguin, sin em¬bargo, *to struggle alone,* esto es, a nuestros efectos, «que... peleara sola». *(N. del T.)*

[15] En la ed. Penguin, el pasaje encerrado entre los dos asteriscos aparece sustituido por la frase: *«Shakespeare and the musical glasses; but». (N. del T.)*

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